No. 574 DECEMBER 20, 1907 5 CENTS

NEW

NICK CARTER

WEEKLY

THE MYSTERY OF THE EMPTY GRAVE

STREET & SMITH,
PUBLISHERS,
NEW YORK.

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Avenue, N. Y. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1907, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C.*

No. 574. NEW YORK, December 28, 1907. Price Five Cents.

THE MYSTERY OF THE EMPTY GRAVE;

Sec. Mch. 23, 1903.
Fed. Oct. 18. 1907.

OR,

NICK CARTER'S DEAL FROM A COLD DECK.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE GHOULS.

The gust-strewn leaves rustled under foot as though whispering together of the errand which brought the two men to the graveyard. It was a grewsome hour of a dark night, and the neighborhood of Alphant churchyard was not likely to attract many casual visitors at such a time and under such conditions.

There was a watery moon hanging low in the west, across the face of which thick patches of cloud fled from time to time, whipped on their way by a sharp and vagrant wind.

But even when the face of the moon was bare, little of her light shone upon the graves. Tall, dank cedars, in solid rows, bordered the road and cast their shadows upon the cemetery.

Here and there through these shadows loomed a white shaft, or slab of marble, with a ghostliness of appearance that would ordinarily keep even the unsuperstitious at a distance.

Such portion of the churchyard as was not under the shadow of the cedars was wrapped in that of the church itself. On the farther side of the steepled edifice the blackness could almost be felt; and this shadow lay there for the rest of the night, unless the heavens should chance to clear.

"Not much likelihood of that," said the more sturdy of the men who had skirted the church-building, in answer to the muttered suggestion of his companion. "See! there's a dash of rain. If we don't have to work in a saturating downpour we'll be lucky."

"Ugh!" muttered the other, with an apparent shiver. "We're not likely to find any luck in *this* business."

The older man snorted—in disgust—and pitched the tools he carried to the ground. They were a shovel, pick, and bar; the smaller man carried a second shovel. They stood beside a new-made grave.

Methodically the man removed his coat, vest, collar, and tie, and then wound his suspenders around his waist for a belt. He was a finely proportioned man—well built without a sign of obesity, with smoothly slipping muscles on his shoulders, massive upper arms, and broad of chest. With some hesitation his companion followed his example as far as the removal of his upper garments went; but when the leader drove the pick into the ground where a wooden cross marked the head of the grave, the other shuddered and shrank back.

"This is an awful thing we do, sir!" he whispered, trying to get a view of the other's face.

"Pick up your shovel and go to work, young man!" commanded the leader, with some asperity. "You want something. You tell me you want it badly. This is the way to get it. Set to work!"

He worked like a giant himself, using pick, bar, and shovel alternately. The dry, sandy soil was flung out of the trench on either side and the redug grave grew apace. The earth had been disturbed so recently that it was an easy matter to loosen it now.

The larger and older man worked steadily; but the other evidently shrank from the toil. He started fearfully at the least sound, and often halted to listen to some fancied approach through the shadowy churchyard.

This continual nervousness finally called forth a grim chuckle from his hardier comrade.

"Come, come!" he advised. "Faint heart ne'er won fair lady, you know."

The younger man started and glanced sharply at him. The darkness hid the expressions of both, however; otherwise the flush that suddenly dyed the young man's face might have told his companion something that he was not to learn until long afterward.

"And you're doing this for a girl, you say—eh?" pursued the sturdy one, throwing out more dirt. "Curiosity alone would inspire me. I don't need the rustle of a petticoat. Well! Dig away. Something we surely must find. Whether it be what we suspect, or no——"

"What *you* suspect, sir," corrected the other.

"Ah! perhaps. I have not inspired you with my suspicion?"

"Not yet."

The other grunted and suddenly his shovel-point rang on something hard.

"Ah!" ejaculated the young man, hearing this.

"All right. We'll reach it in a minute now. Keep a stiff upper lip, boy. Heave ahead!"

They flung out more of the loosened dirt. The plank cover of the coffin began to be bared.

"This is a dreadful quest!" murmured the younger man again.

"Perhaps."

"To open a dead man's grave——"

"If it *is* a dead man's grave."

"But we know he was buried here, sir!" exclaimed the other.

"*I* don't know it."

"Oh, that is sure. I talked with the sexton of the church. He helped bear the coffin from the hearse and lower it into the grave. There is surely *some* body in it, if not that of Mr. Towne."

"Perhaps," the other said again, and with the same inflection.

"Great heavens, sir! you do not believe the sexton's report?"

"I reckon he wouldn't have buried an empty coffin."

"Well, then! It will be just as bad to open the coffin, if another man than Towne is in it. Why! he's been buried two weeks."

"If he's in it—yes."

"Ah! you mean——"

"There might be something in it instead of a body."

"Oh, by Jove!"

"We'll know in a minute. Hand me that bar. Thunder! this box sounds——"

The older man did not finish, but rapped the point of the bar on the coffin-cover. It was a plain deal-box.

"What's that, sir?"

"Hollow!" murmured he with the bar.

"*Hollow?*" gasped the other, coming closer to the brink of the hole.

"Or I'm a Dutchman!—which my great, great, great-grandfather was!" muttered the man in the grave.

He tapped the box again. The sound seemed to reassure him. With an explosive ejaculation he seized the bar in both hands and drove the sharp end through the plank at the end where the feet of the corpse—if corpse there was—should be.

His companion uttered an involuntary groan and shrank again from the edge of the excavation.

But the other paid no further attention to him. Blow after blow he struck upon the coffin-lid, splintering it finally from end to end.

"I'll get you now!" he grunted, and slipping the point of the bar into this crack, he pried up mightily.

"Oh!" gasped the young man, evidently almost undone.

And the drawing of the nails *was* a horrible sound—almost humanlike as the steel wire drew out of the wood.

With another grunt—perhaps of disgust—the man stooped, seized the broken plank, and, wrenching it free, threw it out of the hole.

"Oh, be careful, sir!" begged the man above.

Suddenly a light flashed in the bottom of the open grave. The big man had seized an electric-hand-lamp that had been laid carefully at one side, and snapped on the light.

The bull's-eye of white light darted into the broken coffin, into which the loosened sand was slowly sifting. And there was no more horrifying contents in the box than the sand itself.

The coffin was empty!

CHAPTER II.

PROWLERS OF THE NIGHT.

"By Heaven!" almost shouted the man outside the grave. "You were right, sir! You were right! There's nothing in it."

But the other made no immediate reply. His face, however, did not show the satisfaction of one who has proved his opinion to be correct.

"You say nothing, sir. Aren't you satisfied? It must be as you suggested—Arthur Towne is not dead."

"Hold on! hold on, young man!" growled his companion, standing upright in the grave and snapping out the light again. "I never said that."

"Oh, but——"

"I never even suggested it."

"But he's not here!"

"No. I should say not. But according to this sexton you saw, there *was* a body buried. There was weight, at least, in the coffin. The express company's agent knows that, too. Somebody—or something—was buried in this grave."

"Merciful heavens! you don't suppose——"

"What?"

"That the grave has been opened before this?"

"Ah-ha! That somebody has been ahead of us in playing grave-robber?"

"Ye-es."

"That might be—that might be."

"I tell you, sir, there is a deep mystery here. I was convinced before that a conspiracy has been formed against poor Miss O'Neil."

"Humph! And that this fellow, Arthur Towne, is in it?"

"Why, the man's dead!"

"Perhaps."

"But, sir, he certainly proved himself a brave man when he saved Miss O'Neil from the sea. And brave men do not lend themselves to low plots which are sure to injure and hurt the—the affections of others. Oh, no! I believe Mr. Towne dead."

"Humph!" muttered the other thoughtfully. "And so do I."

"Then, sir, what does this empty grave mean?"

"What do you think yourself?"

"Why—why——" Could it be possible that Mr. Towne was the victim of foul play, and that the murderers have removed the body for fear that the grave might be opened and their crime discovered?"

"Very ingenious, Mr. Parr; very ingenious," observed the older man, but whether he smiled or not it was too dark for his companion to see. "That being the case, however, why should they have taken the trouble to bury the body here at all?"

"Oh, I see! You think——"

"You were doing the thinking, Mr. Parr," chuckled the other.

"My—my goodness! I don't know what to think. If simply ballast of some kind was put into that coffin to represent the weight of a corpse, what has become of the ballast?"

"To be sure," muttered the other, stooping again and running his hand and arm into the open box. "That *is* a question!"

The coffin was certainly empty. He felt of the sides and touched the bottom. The latter was so rotted that the fiber of the plank could easily be broken. The investigator pushed his fist through the bottom of the box without much effort.

"There's certain sure nothing here," he muttered again. "The coffin is falling to pieces—so quick! Ha!"

Something in this discovery seemed to surprise him, or to suggest to his mind a new train of thought. He stood up suddenly, and, seizing the hand-lamp, again flashed the spot-light into the broken box.

At that moment Parr stooped and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Eh?" asked the man in the hole, starting from his reverie, and glancing up.

Parr had his face turned away and seemed to be listening. He made no audible reply; but the man in the grave stood up.

There was a throbbing sound in the air—a noise which grew momentarily as they listened.

"Chug, chug, chug," it went, with an occasional gasp between the explosions.

"An auto," breathed the younger man.

"Hang it! I told Danny not to move," grumbled the man in the hole.

"That's not your car, sir."

"No?"

"It's coming from the other direction. It's coming down the hill. Who—who do you suppose it can be?"

"Humph!" grunted the man. "This is not a night for pleasure-trips—not through these roads. Alphant isn't popular with motorists."

They fell silent, while the throbbing of the car drew nearer and nearer. The pace at which it ran betrayed haste and lack of caution. Alphant was a scattered village and there was no police-protection. The motor thundered down the long hill unchallenged.

The men at the open grave had really no fear of being disturbed at their grewsome work; especially by people arriving in a motor; yet they stood almost breathlessly listening to the charging car.

"By George!" suddenly ejaculated the man. "They're pulling up."

He leaped out of the grave and thrust the lamp into the pocket of his coat. With hasty fingers he buttoned both vest and coat after flinging them on.

"They're going to stop here," whispered the younger man, who had hastily bundled on his own upper clothing.

It was true. The motor-car stopped dead before the front of the church. They heard a gruff voice giving some order.

"That's our cue to beat it!" whispered the leader of

the two grave-openers. "Not that way, man! Come here! Follow me."

Dark as it was he seemed to know his way through the churchyard. They left the tools lying on the ground, with the bar still sticking into the broken box, which, instead of containing a corpse, they had found empty.

The younger man was not so sure-footed as his companion. Within five yards he went head first over a low foot-stone, crashed through a crate of lathes which sheltered some set-plants, and made noise enough to raise all the dogs of the neighborhood, had the automobile not already done so.

"What's that?" shouted a voice in front of the church.

There followed a patter of feet.

"Catch them!" shouted another voice, and the fugitives knew that whoever the occupants of the motor-car were, they had come around the corner and were at the open grave, in the deep shadow of the church.

"Come on, youngster!" exclaimed the energetic man, dragging Parr to his feet after his tumble. "Keep beside me. You'll have the whole pack on our heels."

"Who can they be? Who can they be?" murmured Parr.

"I'd like to know as well as you," growled the other. "But this is no time to stop and ask questions. I'm more anxious that they sha'n't know who *we* are."

They were in a wider path now, and the leading man, who seemed to set his feet on firm ground by instinct, gripped his companion's arm and held him up as they ran.

There was a loud shout from behind, and then a pistol cracked. The glare of the exploding powder lit up the group who had reached the open grave. The fugitives looked back quickly.

"Three of them—and armed. We'll keep on, Parr," said the leader.

"I should say we would!" ejaculated the younger man, breathing heavily.

"Oh, we might be able to down them."

"No, no! I can run better than I can fight. Perhaps there is a constable. Think what a mess we'd be in."

"Quite true!" admitted the other, with a chuckle. "Ah! here's the fence. Over with you!"

Another pistol-shot spurred them. Parr leaped convulsively, for the bullet cut through the leaves above their heads.

"That chap must see in the dark," muttered the chief grimly.

He seized Parr suddenly and swung him over the fence, vaulting afterward as a third shot splintered the upper rail.

"He's getting our range. Come on! Don't stop to turn up your pants, brother!"

"How—you—can—joke!" panted Parr, who was undeniably rattled.

"Here's the road," said the other. "Come on, now! Lift your feet. Ah! there's Danny. He's got *some* sense. He'll be ready for us."

The purring of a second motor-car was plain directly ahead of them in the dark tunnel of the road. Trees shouldered each other on either hand, and the two escaping men could see no obstacle until they fairly came upon it.

There were shouts and oaths behind. A fourth shot went wild. Then the pursuers reached the fence and halted to discuss the matter. They, too, evidently heard the other motor-car.

Meantime the two fugitives came upon a bulky vehicle. The big man uttered a low whistle.

"Tumble into the back, Parr. All right, Danny—let her go! This district is getting too thickly populated for our healths. We'll vamose."

At the moment the pistol behind once more spoke, and those in the motor-car heard the pounding of footsteps along the road.

"Bring up the motor! bring up the motor!" roared a voice. "The scoundrels have got a car themselves."

CHAPTER III.

THE CHASE.

Alphant is on no railroad-line, although within a score of miles of the heart of Manhattan, and therefore has no telegraph-office. As for the telephone, anybody would find it a hard matter, at half-past one at night, to discover a house that boasted one in the neighborhood.

The road behind the churchyard—the one on which the grave-robbers had left their automobile—was the most direct road to the city. It passed over Sudder's Hill, and from the ridge of that dove on a long slant down to the river, where there was a draw-bridge. No cross-path opened out of this road between the hilltop and the river.

The car which Danny had started began to buck the hill at once. The man with the gun was left rods behind in the first minute; but he continued to yell for his own auto, like King Richard calling for a horse.

And before the first car had got far up the track the noise of the other proved that she had been brought around the church and was likewise on this road.

"We're in for a race, Mr. Parr," said the older man, who was occupying the seat beside the driver.

"I—I hope they won't overtake us," stammered the man behind.

"Oh, this old machine can travel some. I fancy our friends behind have got a very powerful buggy, however. But a stern chase is always a long chase."

"But suppose they should catch us?"

"Don't suppose it, Mr. Parr—don't suppose it," said

the other, sitting easily in his seat and speaking over the back to the trembling young man. Perhaps, too, he could gage the speed of the following automobile better in this way, too. The lights of the pursuers' machine were in sight, whereas that in which they sat ran dark.

"You take the matter so coolly!" groaned Parr, shaking his head.

"To be sure—to be sure."

"But what a dreadful thing if we should be caught. Think of the exposure——"

"That's according to who caught us."

"How's that?" asked Parr, puzzled.

"Perhaps these fellows behind would not desire exposure any more than we."

"I—I don't understand you. Surely there is an officer of the law in that vehicle."

"Perhaps."

"But who else would dare fire a revolver on the public road?"

"My—dear—sir," drawled the other, laughing, "some people *will* be careless with firearms. And perhaps there were those who didn't want that grave opened quite as strongly as we wanted to see into it."

"Great heavens, sir! then you *do* believe that there is a conspiracy afoot, and that Miss O'Neil is in danger?"

"Softly! softly! I am not going so far as to say anything of the kind. But certainly it looks to me, by this interference, as though you were being watched, and that somebody who is interested in keeping Arthur Towne dead and buried is on our trail."

"Who—who can it be?"

"My—dear—sir!" ejaculated the other man again. "You propound such important questions so carelessly! Now, that I call a leading query. Why, if I could answer it, the entire matter would be at an end. We would understand the mystery of the empty grave and everything connected with the story which you told me last evening.

"Mr. Parr! you are an exceedingly clever story-teller. I don't know when I have been so interested in a narrative as I was while you were putting this most mysterious business before me. But you are too nervous to make a success of the profession of grave-robbing."

"Oh, don't, sir! You horrify me. I believe if there had been a body in that box I should have fainted," chattered Parr.

"No, son! you never know what you'll do under given circumstances until you experience them," chuckled the older man. "There's worse than you, Mr. Parr."

Then to the driver he said:

"A little more speed, Danny, my lad. They're gaining on us."

Pursuer and pursued were well up the rise now. The second auto was certainly the faster machine. But if the leader of the fugitives feared that they would be overhauled, he gave no sign.

Just as the leading machine mounted the head of the rise the pistol behind popped again. Parr dodged down below the high back of the tonneau.

"Why, they're shooting at us again!" he groaned. "They must be police, sir."

"I doubt it!"

"Then why——"

"Police would be a bit more careful of their shooting—especially as they must be doubtful of our identity."

Again the pistol snapped.

"That fellow means business. And he's not such a bad shot. If he should puncture one of our tires now——"

The car leaped forward under the accelerated speed Danny had given it. They were at the top of the hill now, and here was a level stretch. The unwinking eyes of the following motor were plucked out in the darkness. But they could still hear the high buzz of her engine.

"She's a heavy machine," muttered the leader of the fugitives, but turned about to look ahead.

They were taking big chances running without any lights themselves. But Danny's eyes were good, and the clouds were thinner now, so that some gleam of silver moonlight helped them.

"There's the river!" exclaimed Parr, who was standing up and clinging to the back of the front seat.

"I see."

"Why, look at that lantern—it's being hoisted!" cried Parr.

"By thunder!" exclaimed the other man.

Even Danny appeared to be startled. He reduced speed.

"Keep on!" ordered the leader. "They're going three yards to our two now."

"But, sir, that is the draw-signal," exclaimed the chauffeur.

"I know it. But we've got to get through, man! Go on!"

"It's madness, sir," gasped Parr, from behind. "I can see the lights on the boat being towed through. The bridge is already swinging!"

He clutched at the leader's shoulder as he spoke, and all three stared down the long, steep hill to the river. It was still too dark for them to make out the outlines of the bridge; but besides the lantern that had been run up to the apex of the pole, signaling the opening of the draw, there were other lights twinkling at the bridge site. And, as Parr said, moving slowly in the river were the lights of the craft being towed through the draw.

"By heavens, sir! we shall be killed," gasped Parr.

"Humph! that remains to be seen. There's no way of branching off this road. And we can't stop——"

"But we *must* stop!"

"And let these fellows behind overtake us? Are you looking for a plug of lead, or a cell in the cooler—which?"

"But——"

"Stand ready to do what I say," commanded the other quickly. "Danny, I'll take your place. Mr. Parr, open the right-hand-door of the tonneau, and stand ready to jump when I give you the word."

"Oh, sir! Jump?"

"That's it. I'll slow down a bit. I know this road well, and right down here is a sandy hillside. With ordinary good-luck you won't be hurt. Land well on your heels and lean back. You'll slide to the bottom of the ditch. It's dry.

"And, Danny, you do the same. Take care of Mr. Parr. And, Mr. Parr, I'll see you to-morrow, if you please. Call at my house."

"But great heavens, man!" cried the passenger. "What will you do? Aren't you going to jump, too?"

"I'll stick to the machine! Now, sir—*jump!*"

The impelling force of the command fairly carried Parr out of the tonneau.

"Now, Danny!" cried his master.

"Aw, sir! let *me* stick by the car. Jump yerself," pleaded the chauffeur.

"Jump, you rascal!" roared the owner of the big Mercedes.

The next moment the second body whirled through the air and plunged down the hillside. But the moon did not show these escapes. Those in the car behind believed that the chase was almost over.

Down the hill plunged the two racing cars, and the brakes were off! For a little way the leading car had been checked—just long enough for two of the party to leap.

Now, the brakes released, it flew down the road like a ball from a rifle. The remaining occupant of the car heard the frantic yelling of those in the motor behind.

"Stop your car! stop your car, you fools!"

The hoarse voice that had before commanded them to hold bawled this order again and again.

Meanwhile the leading auto plunged down the last few hundred yards of the slope and struck the level at the river's brink. The heavy barge being towed through the draw was still in the way. The bridge could not be closed in time.

The two bridge-tenders ran out of their shanty, yelling. The shouts of those in the second car, as their own speed was shut off, rang in the ears of the daring motorist in the first car.

A clump of trees beside the road hid the first car for an instant. Then it shot out across the level, smashed through the flimsy gate which had been dropped across the bridge, and, amid the yells of the bridge-tenders and the crew of the barge, the machine, like a living monster, plunged over the brink of the open draw into the river!

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER AT HOME.

It was mid-forenoon, and Nicholas Carter was breakfasting in the room that served him as combination den and office. He was, in fact, dividing his attention between the breakfast—served on a tray before him on a corner of the big writing-table—and the smudgy first edition of an afternoon daily that displayed, under flaring head-lines, the following, on its first page:

GRAVE-ROBBING WITH A MOTOR!

THE PEACEFUL VALLEY OF ALPHANT VISITED AND ITS OLD CHURCHYARD RIFLED BY GHOULS IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT—A FURIOUS RACE OF MOTOR-CARS, ENDING IN A DIRE TRAGEDY.

Green-walled by the hills of upper Westchester, Alphant village is as quiet a spot as exists within many a mile of the metropolis. But early to-day the entire community—consisting of fourteen families and 'Lige Beacon, who is a bachelor, and "baches it" in the room behind his grocery and dry-goods-emporium—was roused as it has not been roused since the time the stranger who looked like William Jennings Bryan blew in, and the citizens of Alphant—voting the Republican ticket en masse—thought he had arrived to give a free silver speech instead of to sell patent lamp-wicks and Peckham's Peerless Purgative Pills.

Lige Beacon, besides being a bachelor and the owner of the only department-store between One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street and Hog's Neck, is likewise the constable. Mr. Beacon sleeps with one eye open, an ear stretched wide, and a loaded old Springfield rifle, that is known to have shot a mule during the late unpleasantness between the North and South, hanging over the head of his couch.

It was near half-past one—verified by a squint at Grandsire Beacon's eight-day clock, which has run thirty years in the store without cleaning or a drop of anything but an occasional squirt of the first quality product of the Standard Oil Company—when 'Lige was wakened out of his maiden-sleep by the mad tooting of a gasoline-wagon coming down Sudder's Hill. 'Lige keeps gasoline. Alphant is awake to the trend of modern progress, and the blacksmith at the end of the village contemplates taking down his horse-shoeing-sign and replacing it with "Garage."

'Lige didn't know but what the automobile might be tooting the signal for first aid. He hurried into his pants and broke out of the side door just as a big car rushed by, tearing up the little rise toward Alphant Church. Thinking that possibly the autoists had mistaken the locality of the gasoline supply, 'Lige sallied forth, with the addition of a pair of carpet-slippers worked across the instep with red roses and blue forget-

me-nots. 'Lige won't tell who worked 'em—but he blushes.

Meanwhile the constable knew by the sounds that some of the motorists had disembarked, and were stumbling about among the graves. Before the doughty 'Lige reached the car, a great hullabaloo arose beyond the church-edifice.

There were three men with this car; but they were all so disguised in coats, caps, and masks, that the constable swears he wouldn't "have knowed 'em from wild ganders!" He managed to learn, from the excited individual who acted as chauffeur, that the stopping of the auto at that place was quite by accident—indeed, that their running through Alphant at all was unpremeditated. They mistook a turning in the night and were hurrying to get back to the city. But as they came to the churchyard they had seen some figures acting strangely among the grave-stones, and curiosity had spurred them to investigate.

Back came one of the motorists then, singing out that the scoundrels had robbed a grave, had run through the cemetery carrying the body, and had a car on the back road. Such news as this naturally put Constable Beacon on the alert. Alphant churchyard is too far from any hospital to encourage ordinary ghouls, and Beacon had never heard before of anything worse than pullets being stolen in that neighborhood.

He rushed into the churchyard and found the grave in question. In fact, he fell into it. There were tools scattered about. The coffin was broken open and empty. The grave was that of a stranger in the vicinity, who had been brought there and buried some two weeks before. While Beacon was making these discoveries—including how many times a man may bark his shins and elbows in falling into an open grave and getting out again—the car in the main road got under way again and was whirled through the lane and out into the back road. Constable Beacon ran through the yard to demand of the men to halt and explain further; but the car picked up a third man back there, who seemed to be ineffectually trying to puncture the night with pistol-balls, and away the motor sped. Beacon said that then he heard a second car some distance ahead, "and both of 'em chuggin' erway like all git-aout!" he declares.

Mr. Beacon ran back to the store, seized the loaded Springfield rifle, and stood guard beside the open grave till daylight. The reporter quoted the old saw about locking the barn after the horse is stolen to Mr. Beacon, but to no avail. Possibly 'Lige thought that the ghouls might try to come back and replace the body, and he proposed to catch them in the act.

From the sexton of Alphant Church, Mr. Peter Dawes, an old man who has lived in the valley all his life, it was learned that the corpse stolen was that of Mr. Arthur Towne, as far as the sexton knows, a stranger in the place. There was a family of Townes living in Alphant years ago, but Mr. Dawes believes they died out.

He clearly stated, however, the conditions under which this dead man was buried at Alphant. A gentleman had come to see the clergyman—the Reverend Aaron Summers, at present away at conference—and requested permission to bury a friend in the local cemetery on the church's property. He stated that Mr. Arthur Towne had expressed a wish to be interred in that peaceful spot, having associations of his youth with the valley. The clergyman and the business men of the church agreed, and the gentleman bought a grave site, paid for continual care, and brought his friend and had him buried, the service being read by the Reverend Summers. Locally this is all that is known of the occupant of that particular grave. His nearest friend, giving his name as Mr. John Cox, the sexton believes, was, he thought, a city man. Possibly Mr. John Cox will appear and state whether there can be possibly any reason for any interested person to disinter Mr. Arthur Towne's body in the dead of night.

On the face of it, however, it seems to be a plain case of grave-robbing by some reckless persons—medical students, perhaps. And the tragedy with which this incident ends will doubtless serve to shed full light upon the mystery within twenty-four hours.

Owing to the valiant demeanor of the doughty constable, undoubtedly Alphant was not troubled again following the discovery of the grave-robbing. But the two motor-cars racing over the Westchester hills certainly had a strenuous time. How many were connected with the grave-robbing is unknown; it is reported three at least. But those three unknown ghouls, the corpse they had secured, and the machine they rode in are all at the bottom of the river!

The tragic mystery of the race over the hills enthralls one. And the final outcome of that race shows a reckless disregard for consequences on the part of the grave-robbers that suggests the deliberate act of a maniac!

The two cars followed the road direct to the drawbridge. Before they reached it a barge came through, and the bridge-tenders both swear that the signal was hoisted properly to warn all travelers on the road.

Besides, there were lights on the barge going through, and on the tug ahead. Nevertheless the leading car, containing, it is supposed, the grave-robbers, rushed to its fate—burst through the bridge-gate, and plunged into the river. With grappling-hooks men had drawn the smashed car out of the river—it is a Mercedes machine—this morning. But as yet no trace of the bodies—either those of the grave-robbers or the one dug from the grave—has been recovered.

John Hopkins and Phelan M'Guire, the bridge-tenders on duty last night, state that the second auto stopped only long enough for the bridge to be closed. They tried to

get some explanation from the three men in this machine, but were refused. One man cursed them roughly, and waved what appeared to be a pistol. Then this car sped on toward the city. There was no license number on this car, nor was a number found upon the machine which they took from the river. The river will be dragged to-day, and some effort made by the police to unravel the mystery.

It is understood that Constable 'Lige Beacon will guard the rifled grave with the old Springfield until the missing body is brought back.

CHAPTER V.

CLEVELAND PARR'S STORY.

Nicholas Carter chuckled inordinately over this loosely written newspaper story, and was still chuckling when Joseph announced:

"Mr. Parr, sir."

"Ah?"

"Yes, sir. He seemed doubtful if you was at home, sir," and the faint shadow of a smile passed over the face of the man.

"All right, Joseph. Send him up," and the detective turned smilingly toward the door to greet the dapper, softly walking, rather timid-appearing young man who entered hurriedly.

Mr. Cleveland Parr, at first view, did not impress one as being either robust of physique or nature. But he had good eyes that looked one firmly in the face, and an obstinate chin that saved the rest of his countenance from appearing weakly.

"By Heaven, sir! are you really alive?" he gasped, hurrying forward to grip Carter's hand with warmth.

"According to latest reports it seems we're all at the bottom of the river," laughed Nick Carter, tossing the newspaper on the table.

"I saw it. And who do you suppose those people were who chased us?"

"Slowly! slowly!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Carter?"

"You're rushing me. About the identity of those fellows, I mean."

"Oh!"

"Make up your mind to one thing, Parr."

"What's that, sir?"

"They were not ordinary tourists who chanced to come past the cemetery and saw us digging—not they!"

"I'll be bound they weren't, sir."

"We were followed, Parr."

"But who could know——"

"My boy, somebody is sharp. We need to find out who that somebody is. We're not going to have clear sailing in this matter."

"You really believe, then, Mr. Carter, that a deep plot has been laid against Miss Sallie and Mr. Towne?"

"Miss O'Neil? Yes. Mr. Towne? Well, let's go deeper into that. See here," observed the detective, pushing back from his tray and offering his cigar-case to his visitor, while he lit a weed himself. "Let us get this straight. I must go over the points of your story. Correct me if I fail."

Mr. Parr refused the cigar, but watched Carter closely from his seat as the detective marked off the points.

"Miss Sallie O'Neil is the heiress of old General Jones O'Neil, dead some ten years now, and at present—and until she marries—ward of Mr. Burton Strusse, financier and banker. Right?"

"Right," admitted Parr.

"There was an engagement between Miss Sallie and Harold Strusse, although he is two years her junior. It's been broken off a year and more now. Why, by the way, Mr. Parr?"

"Oh, Harold is a cad—a contemptible cad."

"Ah! *she* broke it off, then?"

"Indeed she did."

"Very well. Then arises this Mr. Arthur Towne. He saved her life?"

"A year ago—at Long Beach. Miss Sallie is reckless in the water. She's impulsive anywhere, Mr. Carter. She is a wonderfully fine girl—generous, romantic perhaps, but as faithful to her friends as——"

"Yet she threw over her guardian's son?" interrupted Carter.

"Ah! that was another matter. I doubt if Miss Sallie ever really—er—loved the fellow."

"No?"

"She agreed to the engagement to please Mr. Strusse, of whom she is very fond."

"Oh!"

"But he knows his son's failings himself. He made no attempt to change her decision when she threw Harold over—I know that to be a fact."

"Being Mr. Strusse's private secretary, you should be in a position to know," admitted Carter, nodding. "Let us proceed: Soon after this broken engagement Miss O'Neil meets Arthur Towne—eh?"

"Well, not exactly. She didn't meet him. She got beyond her depth, and the undertow was carrying her out. Mr. Towne dove off the raft and caught her."

"Humph! They were thrown together, then, as you might say," observed Carter, smiling. "Well, he saved her. They became friends——"

"Let me put the matter to you more clearly, Mr. Carter," begged Parr, who seemed to chafe under the detective's tone of raillery. "Miss Sallie nearly lost her life. There can be no doubt of it. She was alone in the water; even her maid did not see the rescue.

"And Mr. Towne hurried away as soon as she was in safe hands. She did not even see him. She was

losing consciousness when he caught her, and she only realized how big and strong he was.

"When she came to herself he was not to be found. Miss Sallie is very obstinate, sir, when once her mind is set on a thing. She said to me: 'Parr, I am going to find that brave fellow if it costs me half the money I possess.' And I believe she would have spent it willingly, sir."

"Indeed?"

"But after advertising for a week a letter came. The letter was gentlemanly enough—I saw it. But it was couched in language which showed that Mr. Towne took the thing as a joke. He advised her to advertise no longer, and not waste her money. He was in need of no reward of a financial nature; and he begged her to believe that the satisfaction of knowing he had saved her life would be more to him than he could tell—although what he had done was really nothing more than any other good swimmer might have performed had chance so willed it."

"Altogether we were all—Mr. Strusse, too—pleased with the letter. It was evidently from a man who shrank from publicity and had the instincts of a gentleman.

"But Miss Sallie was not satisfied to let it drop there. She is romantic—that's true, sir. And she was determined to know Mr. Towne better.

"She wrote him. He replied. He seemed to be a traveling man, for his answers came first from one city and then another. Besides, after something serious grew between them, and Miss Sallie stopped reading us his letters, he seemed to be very busy—so busy that he could not seem to find time to come and see us—Miss Sallie, I mean."

"That neglect seemed intentional, to your mind?" asked Carter quickly.

"Not at all, sir! It seemed perfectly natural."

"You were favorably impressed by this Towne?" asked Carter, eying Parr thoughtfully.

"I—I hoped he was the sort of a man to make Miss Sallie happy. I believe she deserves the best man ever made!" he exclaimed vigorously.

"Humph! Well, you seem to be telling the story again yourself. Perhaps that is best," added Carter. "Go on."

"Well, sir, I think it went on for some time before any of us suspected that there was something between Miss Sallie and Towne. It was Mr. Daggett who spoke first to me about it."

"Mr. Daggett? Who is he? This is a new name you have sprung on me," said Carter curiously.

"Mr. Ben Daggett. Mr. Strusse's nephew. He lives at the house and does a good deal of Mr. Strusse's business. I only attend to the private correspondence, and such matters, you know."

"Ah-ha!" muttered Carter reflectively. "Haven't I heard of this young Daggett before? There is surely something familiar about the name. Who was his father? Mr. Strusse's brother——"

"In-law," finished Parr.

"Ah! and Strusse was interested in the old North Side Mechanics' Bank that went to smash some years ago?"

"Ye-es. In a small way."

"I have it!" exclaimed Carter, eying Parr again sharply. "This Daggett—the old one—what was he in the bank?"

"At last he was a suicide in it," said Parr, shaking his head mournfully.

"He wrecked it! He was the cashier!" ejaculated Nick Carter. "I have a good memory for names, as I have for faces. There was a scandal over that bank-wreck. Mr. Daggett shot himself in his office—so he did."

"A terrible calamity for the family, Mr. Carter. Mr. Strusse cannot bear to speak of it now. And he made good the bank's loss himself."

"Yes? How do you know?" queried Carter sharply.

"Why, sir, it is a fact. The depositors were paid cent per cent. I have seen newspaper clippings relating how Mr. Strusse came forward and assumed his dead brother-in-law's responsibilities."

Nick Carter arose and stepped to a great cabinet that stood between one of the curtained windows and the yawning fireplace. The cabinet was of steel, though painted to represent wood, and each small section was defended by a steel curtain that rolled up when he unlocked it. He opened the section marked "Banks."

Into view popped a set of drawers evidently filled with what is known as a "card-catalogue," divided into alphabetical subdivisions. He opened the drawer marked "S-R," and, running through the cards, found this, which he read to himself, not aloud:

"Strusse, Burton. Bn. Stutgart, Ger., Apr. 12, 1852, of Eng. & Ger. parents; emigrated with parents in '61; com. sch. ed.; no trade; imp. furs, diamonds; wh'ls'le groceries till '78; mines, esp. early coppers; rated mil. '98; in '07 finance & banking; Wood Pulp Trust;

"Nth. Side Mech. Bank in '81; director; A. B. Daggett, brother-in-law, found shot through head in cashier's office—own hand; bad Ins. & misap'ns $112,000. Courts would not hold directors. S. settled bank's default in full nine months following wreck. *Why?*"

Nick Carter read this card slowly. It was one of many thousands in the case.

The case contained information regarding many, many men, of high and low degree, who had chanced to come within the meshes of courts, or under suspicion of all shades, by the police.

The names of some had never been whispered by the newspapers in connection with any incident of the smallest illegality. Yet their names and records were here, for some time in their life, and within Nick Carter's ken, their paths had crossed that of some crook, or some

crooked business, which had gained the great detective's scrutiny.

Now he put his forefinger on that last word on the card—the query, Why?—and he whispered it.

He closed the cabinet and came back to his seat at the table.

"What manner of young man is this Ben Daggett?" he asked.

"Eh?" Parr started. Evidently Parr's mind had been wool-gathering. "Why, a very good fellow. Entirely different from his cousin, I can assure you."

"How old?"

"Rising thirty."

"Always lived with his uncle?"

"Since his mother died. I believe there was always some feeling on the Widow Daggett's part against Mr. Strusse. She would not live in his household. But Mr. Strusse has done by Mr. Daggett as though he were his own son."

"Save wishing him to marry Miss Sallie—eh?" laughed Carter, but sharply eying Parr as he spoke.

The secretary flushed a little.

"I can't make you see, Mr. Carter, that Miss Sallie is a girl who is bound to choose her own lover. She chose Mr. Towne."

"Ah, yes. To get back to Towne. Mr. Daggett first suspected the attachment?"

"I believe he did. At least, he spoke of it first to me."

"Keen young man, eh?"

"Very," said Parr dryly, and looking puzzled.

"Has no particular reason for watching Miss Sallie, but suspects that she is in love just the same?"

"Mr. Carter!" ejaculated Parr, in some heat. "We all admire Miss Sallie. She is a beautiful girl, and possesses a beautiful character. She was little more than a child, I understand, when she first came to the house as Mr. Strusse's ward. Ben Daggett was then a man grown. He is, of course, fond of her."

"And how much older?"

"Why, less than ten years, I suppose," grumbled Parr, evidently angry that the conversation should have taken such a trend.

"Well, well! To return to our mutton. It's enough to know that the girl and Mr. Towne became engaged, eh? They *were* engaged?"

"Oh, yes! She wears a beautiful ring. He frequently sent her presents. They were engaged two months before—before this catastrophe."

"Humph! his death, you mean?"

"Yes. And it is a catastrophe. Nothing less. Miss O'Neil is heart-broken. As I have told you, she is impulsive, warm-hearted, and faithful. Perhaps, because she had never seen Mr. Towne——"

"What! Had never seen him?" cried Carter suddenly, sitting up in his chair and eying Parr with orbs that fairly sparkled for a moment. "She never saw him?"

"No-o."

"Yet was engaged to him?"

"Why, he was coming to New York when he was stricken down. I tell you he was a very busy man, and traveled continually. Why, he went as far west as St. Louis, and south to Florida."

"Humph!"

"Of course, she saw him when he grabbed her in the sea. But she couldn't remember how he looked, excepting that he was a big man. And then they rather made a joke of it, you know."

"Of what?"

"Of not knowing each other by sight."

"But surely he would have known her?"

"He said not. He was in too great a hurry when he saved her to get out of sight, so as not to be lionized. So she sent him a special photograph of herself—with a thick veil over her face!"

"Ha!"

"And he returned the compliment by sending her a fine picture of his back hair," said Parr, smiling a little wanly.

"Ha!" repeated Nicholas Carter. "You don't chance to have that photo, of course?"

"Certainly not. After they became engaged, none of us saw it. He was always trying to find time to have a good picture taken to send her then, but did not accomplish it."

"He was a big man, you say?"

"So she remembered him. And the photo he sent showed that. He is broad-shouldered, with a particularly heavy head of hair—rather athletic-looking, I should say."

"Mr. Parr! Make a note of this," said Carter quickly. "Get me that photograph."

"Oh, sir!"

"You can do it. Ask the girl for it, if you must."

"I should have to."

"You said that she was in your confidence about coming to me. She knows it?"

"Oh, yes."

"And who else knows it?"

"Not a soul, sir—not a soul!" exclaimed Parr vigorously.

"Not a soul, eh?" murmured the great detective. "Then, by Jove! who was it chased us last night in that other car?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE END OF ARTHUR TOWNE.

Cleveland Parr heard him, and started suddenly to his feet.

"By Heaven, sir! That is it! That's what has been puzzling me—that and one other thing," he added, mopping his brow, but smiling a little at the detective.

"What's troubling you besides?" asked Nicholas Carter lazily.

"How you ever escaped them last night yourself, sir. Your man took me to the train and hurried me into town. But you—by Heaven! I was sure you were in that car when she went off the bridge."

"No. I fear I wouldn't have been here now, had that been the case."

"But how did you escape?"

"Simplest thing in the world, Parr. There was a group of trees just before we reached the bridge. I knew that road well. The moment the car hit the shadow I leaped upon the seat, and, as we passed under the trees, I sprang into the branches.

"It was not a hard feat. I've accomplished more difficult. It was only to get a secure grip on a limb and draw my own limbs up out of the sight of the other party as their car rushed under. One thing I failed in," concluded the detective, with a wag of his head. "I hoped to mark those men off; but I couldn't."

"Our pursuers?"

"Yes."

"And so we come back to your other question: Who could they be?" groaned Parr. "Mr. Carter! it looks to me like a baffling mystery."

"Tut, tut! Don't waste breath saying 'I can't.' It's better to say 'I'll try!' even if you fail in the end. I am not baffled. I am merely puzzled. If, as you say, nobody knew about your coming here but Miss Sallie and yourself——"

"No other soul, I swear!"

"That is, *you* have told nobody?"

"That is what I mean."

"And you believe she has told nobody?"

"That is what I believe. She took me into her confidence in this thing. She could not come to see you herself without the family knowing it."

"They watch her?" drawled Nick Carter quizzically.

"No, sir! no, sir! But all are interested in it. They live like father, daughter, and brothers."

"Even old man Strusse's son?"

"Oh, Harold is a silly young fool," muttered Parr, with disgust.

"Yes? And do you thing there is any likelihood of Miss Sallie's changing her mind and marrying that silly fool, now that Mr. Arthur Towne has disappeared?"

"Mr. Carter!" exclaimed Parr, leaping up. "You are insulting!"

"Sho! don't lose your temper, Mr. Parr."

"But you go too far, sir. You insult Miss O'Neil."

"Perish the thought!" returned the detective easily. "But stranger things have happened."

"Let me tell you, that thing will never happen. I do not believe that Mr. Strusse would allow his son to marry her if the poor girl was foolish enough to wish it. He is as thoroughly disgusted with Harold as the rest of us. I really believe, were it not for Mr. Ben's throwing oil on the family waters, and Miss Sallie helping to hide Harold's escapades, the old gentleman would have disowned his son."

"Ah-ha?" exclaimed Carter enigmatically. "Well?"

"Well," repeated Parr, in some confusion. "Where was I?"

"Let us go back to the fact that Mr. Arthur Towne was on his way to New York when he fell ill. Typhoid, was it not?"

"So it was reported. His letters stopped coming. The last was from Albany. He declared he had several trips to make to small towns up the river and into Connecticut, and then he would be in New York. We were all eager to see him."

"Mr. Harold Strusse, too?" queried Carter, with innocent face.

Parr flushed again and said:

"I think he was curious."

"Sure! Go on."

"And then the letters ceased coming," repeated Parr, his voice shaking for a moment, and his eyes turned away. "At first we were only surprised. Then we became alarmed. I believe Miss O'Neil was the least

alarmed of any of us. She had—had such perfect trust in the fellow, you see.

"But when ten days went by without a word, she broke down. Mr. Strusse declared he was determined to do something. He was divided between believing the fellow a villain and the victim of foul play. Then the letter came."

"The one from this John Cox?"

"Yes."

"You'd never heard of him before?"

"Oh, yes. At least, Miss Sallie had. She said Towne had mentioned him once or twice in his later letters."

"Ah!" muttered Carter again.

"He seemed to have been connected with Towne in business matters, but did not have his confidence in personal affairs," explained Parr.

"So that's it, eh?"

"Yes, sir. It must have been so, for he seemed to know nothing about Mr. Towne and Miss O'Neil being engaged. He merely wrote, enclosing a sealed note that Towne had managed to write while he was ill. Cox found it among his effects, he said, after Mr. Towne was buried. As it was addressed to Miss Sallie, he knew where to send it; but evidently from the tone of his letter he knew nothing else.

"He stated merely that Towne had died on a certain day, and that he had buried him by request in his old home-village, Alphant. He died up the state, in Peabody Center."

"Humph! had you made enquiries there?"

"Mr. Strusse had the hotel-keeper there on the wire—and so did I. He said there was a man died in his place—he believed the name was Towne. At least, he remembered Mr. Cox very well, for that gentleman paid the bill and took the body away."

Meanwhile the detective had gone to the wall where rolled maps hung, and pulled out a map of lower New York State, on which were marked even the smaller settlements, and all the driving-roads as well as railroads and water-routes. He placed his finger on Peabody Center, then glanced at the spot lower down marked Alphant.

"Had to be handled by two branches of the express trust," muttered Nick Carter. "Must have taken twenty-four hours, and then was carted over to Alphant four miles from the railroad-station. Humph!"

"You see," murmured Parr, "none of us thought of going to Peabody Center, unless it was Mr. Strusse. He spoke of it. But he and Miss Sallie and Mr. Daggett went over to Alphant in the car and saw the grave. Then Miss Sallie said she did not wish to hear about going to the place where he died."

"She is confident that he is dead, then?" asked Carter quickly.

"Yes, yes!"

"But why did she send you to me, then?"

"Because, after thinking it over, she suspected this Cox."

"Of what, pray?"

"Of making way, perhaps, with Mr. Towne. Perhaps of murdering him. She doesn't know, but is worried. Let me tell you, Mr. Carter, little as she knew Mr. Towne—personally, I mean—he had made a great impression on her. She is a young girl—scarcely of age; she was impressionable, I grant you. But his letters impressed all of us. She had become wrapped up in the man. She—she loved him!" exclaimed Parr brokenly.

"You spoke carelessly a little while ago of her changing her mind and finding another husband. Sallie O'Neil is not that kind of a girl. Had he really been her husband, instead of her lover, she could be no more deeply moved by his death. It will be many a long year before she thinks of another man in that attitude—if ever she does at all!"

"I wouldn't hurt your feelings by holding my belief in opposition to yours, Mr. Parr," Nicholas Carter declared. "But why does she make this investigation in secret?"

"She does not wish to worry her guardian, or to make talk in the family. Mr. Strusse is very much worried about her health. He wants her to go to Europe and recover from the shock there."

"Indeed? But she's of age. Of course, nobody really has any power over her?"

"As to that, her father's will left her Mr. Strusse's ward until she is twenty-five, or until she marries."

"Oh, yes! so you said."

Carter gazed upon the young man shrewdly. He asked, at last:

"How old is she?"

"About twenty-one."

"And if she doesn't marry, Strusse will still manage her estate for four years?"

"Yes. Of course. He is like a father to her. He will probably always manage it—unless she marries a business man."

"And how rich is she?"

"General O'Neil left three millions. It is a great deal more now, of course."

"Must be. Why, she's richer than Strusse himself!"

"Oh, yes. That is so."

Nicholas Carter's lips were puckered to whistle, but the sound did not come. And Parr did not notice.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PHOTO AND THE LETTERS.

There was a little silence between the detective and his visitor. The story of Arthur Towne—his existence as Miss O'Neil's lover, and his lonely death and stranger burial—had in it all the elements of such a mystery as Nick Carter loved.

This was no mere murder, robbery, and clumsy endeavor on the murderer's part to hide the job. Indeed, Carter had much doubt as to whether there was any murder at all.

Yet foul play there certainly had been!

Miss Sallie O'Neil, ward of the wealthy Strusse, wealthy in her own right, was the victim of a plot. The question first confronting Carter was whether the elusive person, Arthur Towne, had been a victim of the same conspiracy, *or a party to it!*

Miss Sallie herself—even Parr, the secretary—evidently, feared that Towne had been made way with. This John Cox, who seemed to have appeared upon the scene at the last moment, buried his friend, and then disappeared, shrouded the entire matter—for Miss Sallie, at least—in a fog of mystery.

Carter saw a dozen other possibilities in the case. Seldom had a situation been presented to him which opened the way for such a range of curiosity.

First of all, when Parr had come to him the day before with the story, Carter had grasped the principal thread. The first thing to learn was whether, indeed, a body—Arthur Towne's body—had been buried in the grave at Alphant Church.

With this end in view the detective had invited the secretary to ride with him up to the Westchester village and open the grave.

"The suggestion of this had at first astonished, then horrified, Parr. But, thirdly, his curiosity and interest were piqued. He had agreed to the illegal proceeding.

"To go at the matter legally would be to give the fact away that an investigation was being made," Nick Carter explained at the time.

Nevertheless, they had been watched. Parr had undoubtedly been followed to the detective's house, and the first move of the detective suspected by the person, or persons, most interested in keeping Arthur Towne "buried."

"And whoever that fellow is, he's a smart one!" muttered Carter, now thinking over the matter. "He'll be no mean antagonist. I can make up my mind that if I bring the truth to light in the matter, I'll not do it easily!"

"Well, Mr. Carter?" Parr said, interrupting the detective's train of thought.

"Ha! impatient, are you?"

"Well, sir, I've told you all; but you have not told me anything."

"True."

"And I promised Miss O'Neil I would bring back some word to her."

"This morning?"

"Yes. I did not wish to say anything about it last night. And, besides, I was worried about you, and wondering if I should be arrested for participation in that grave-robbery."

"Ah!"

"It strikes me as being a serious matter, sir."

"Not a matter to laugh over, despite the splurge of the 'funny man' in the columns of the afternoon press," admitted Nick Carter.

"She will not see the paper, I hope," Parr murmured.

"Well, the rest of them will see it, of course."

"Who do you mean?" cried Parr quickly.

"Oh, I spoke of Mr. Strusse and his family."

"But I was thinking of the men who chased us. They'll believe us dead."

"Don't fool yourself that way, Parr," said Nick Carter, smiling.

"How? Why should they not, sir? The paper says so."

"You of course see that the strangers must have known we were about to open that grave? Otherwise they would not have appeared there at Alphant."

"It—it looks so."

"Then, in the same mysterious way they learned of our attempt, they will learn of our escape from death."

"By Heaven, sir! I did not think of that."

"I do not believe they were watching that empty grave."

"And the grave *was* empty, Mr. Carter," cried Parr, suddenly smiting his hands together. "Tell me—how do you explain that?"

"I am not sure that it is a relative question, Mr. Parr."

"But it's a mighty interesting one—to me, sir," said the young man.

"Yes?"

"Surely, you will agree that a body was buried?"

"I'll agree that something was buried—yes," laughed Carter.

"And not a body? It was heavy. The sexton told me so himself. And it certainly was not rocks, or ironware."

"No."

"Could it be possible, Mr. Carter, as I suggested last night, that Cox—or somebody—had been at that grave before us?"

"No."

"Not possible?"

"No," repeated the detective confidently.

"But—why——"

"I'll tell you. Before we attacked that grave I passed my hand over the mound. The young grass had sprouted on it. Unless the grave was opened very soon after the coffin was buried, the grass would not have been in evidence."

"That's so, sir. I'd never thought of that."

"No. We were the first to open that grave. I do not believe that at first the conspirators—whoever they are—imagined that anybody would suspect them.

"You see, when a man first commits a crime—a crime like this, at least, that is not done on the spur of the moment, or in a paroxysm of passion—he has usually planned the thing all out.

"He has planned every move. He knows what he is to do, how he is to do it, and how he will cover his tracks. Indeed, he makes himself believe too much," declared the detective.

"He goes so far as to figure out in his mind just what the people whom he is fooling will do. He believes he knows what they will do, say, and think.

"But after the crime is done, and even after every trace is eliminated that he thinks might lead to detection, the criminal begins to look upon the whole matter from a different angle.

"It takes a man with a wonderful nerve to commit a crime and then never think of it again. He may not feel remorse, but he must think, *think*, THINK of what he has done!

"He remembers every detail of the business. Should he have been wiser had he done part of it in a different way? He begins to doubt and worry.

"Then it is he sees that he has made possible mistakes. Perhaps the very people he is defrauding, or befooling, do not take the matter just as he expected they would.

"All this, however, does not happen at once. Whoever buried that coffin did not begin to worry enough about it to dig it up again until some days after the funeral had elapsed."

"But, my gracious, Mr. Carter!" cried Parr; "what could possibly have been in that coffin, then? For something heavy was buried. Mr. Towne was a big man, we know. And the sexton seemed to think it was a heavy coffin.

"We certainly did not find anything in the box. You said yourself that it was already rotting away; but, by Jove! a body wouldn't have decomposed in that short time!"

"You are quite right there, sir. Another thing, too," added Carter. "The coffin should not have begun to decay so quickly, either."

"Eh?"

"I mean it."

"But it *was* decayed."

"So that I put my fists through the bottom. It was nothing but a pine-wood box, it is true. Cox did not spend much money on his dear friend."

"Ugh! there is something terribly uncanny about it, sir."

"There is something terribly bungling about it. Yet the man who did it is sharp—sharp as needles, too! Ha! he only fell down in not supplying the proper kind of a body."

"Then you don't believe Mr. Towne was buried at all?" cried Parr, leaping up.

"I did not say so, sir."

"But you mean that?"

"Not wholly. One thing I will tell you right now, Parr. You will never see Mr. Arthur Towne. *He is dead!*"

"Oh, sir!"

"Better for Miss Sallie that she comes to believe that at once. I'll do my best to ferret out the mystery; but

give her no hopes in that direction. Whether there has been foul play or not, Arthur Towne is, to all intents and purposes, in his grave!"

"You speak most mysteriously, Mr. Carter."

"Not at all. I am convinced on that point, however. He is not being held by enemies. We shall probably find that he died of typhoid fever, just as was reported, at the Peabody Center hotel. It will be all regular as far as his death is concerned. Merely that, for some reason, he was not buried in Alphant churchyard. And, by Jove! I believe I'm beginning to see why that is so."

"Eh?"

"The man overreached himself, I believe. He desired to be so sure that nothing would ever be found out—even if the grave was opened—that he committed the folly of disposing of the body he had and so making it appear, if the grave was ever opened, that it had been previously robbed."

"By Heaven, Mr. Carter! What do you mean? I tell you there was some weight in the coffin when it was buried."

"True," admitted Nick Carter. "But not the weight of a body. And certainly we found no ballast in it. Don't you see what he *did* do, Mr. Parr?"

"No, no! I can't imagine."

"Well, let me tell you what I saw at once—when I discovered the box to be empty. Knowing that in all human probability the grave had not been disturbed since the burial, I had to find an explanation of the mystery. And that was easy," said Nick Carter, smiling; "when you look at all the circumstances.

"In the first place, take into consideration the fact of the unexpected decay of the box—especially the bottom of the box."

"Well?"

"Did you notice how free from moisture that soil was we flung out of the grave?"

"Goodness! no! I was so scared I didn't think of anything of the kind," admitted Parr.

Carter laughed.

"Well, that was very dry, sandy soil. In fact, there isn't a bit of water in all that side-hill. You have to dig down twenty feet and bore through rock to get at water in all that portion of Westchester.

"So I was amazed by the box showing signs of dampness and decay. Then, again, it was the bottom boards that were worse. Therefore, but one explanation, Mr. Parr—but one explanation!"

"And what was that?" cried the amazed secretary.

"Ice."

"What, sir?"

"Ice," repeated Carter, smiling.

"For pity's sake—do you mean——"

"Ice buried in the coffin. Ice instead of a corpse. Of course, it melted, and in time would have left no sign. The fellow was cute—over cute. I call it a deal from a pretty cold deck," laughed Carter, rubbing his hands.

"He made way with the real body and supplied a coffin full of ice for the minister to say the burial-service over. He had plenty of witnesses to swear that the coffin contained a heavy body. Sure!

"In six weeks more, had the grave been opened, no one could have discovered the trick then. All the boards would have been more or less decayed, and the dampness for the most part dried up in the sand.

"It would have looked as though grave-robbers had been at work, and nothing could ever have been proved against him, whoever he is!"

"Cox!" exclaimed Parr.

"Well, we'll call him Cox, for the present," said Carter slowly.

"But how can you prove anything now? We seem to be quite as much in the air as we would be a year from now!"

Carter fitted his finger-tips together and said slowly:

"It may be that we shall be sorry when we *have* got hold of the main thread of this mystery. But, however that may be, we will take up the investigation."

"Why, what can we do?" cried Parr.

"First of all, bring me the photograph of Arthur Towne, one of his letters, and the letter written by Mr. Cox. You will have to tell the girl. Tell nobody else—understand?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Carter. I'll do just as you say. But do you really believe you can fathom the mystery?"

"With those articles I can," declared the detective, and then turned with sudden activity to his pile of morning mail that Joseph had brought in. "Good morning, Mr. Parr!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AT PEABODY CENTER.

Parr rose to go, and followed Joseph out. As the serving-man held the door open for the departing visitor,

he glanced keenly back at the detective apparently deeply absorbed in his letters.

Joseph allowed Parr to go down the stairs alone. He stepped back to Nick Carter's side.

"I beg yer pardon, sir! Did you speak?" he asked.

Without looking up Carter gave a muttered command, and the serving-man hurried after the visitor. In ten minutes he was back.

"Well?" asked the detective, as Joseph came in, panting.

"He is, sir."

"Who's doing it?"

"A tin-badger I never saw before. He's not a Pinkerton man."

"Sure?"

"Certainly!" cried Joseph. "It sticks out all over him! He followed Mr. Parr the minute he reached the corner. On the next block he took a cab, and the fellow ran on and took one at the next corner. It was waiting for him."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir!"

"And you saw no other shadower hanging around?"

"No, sir."

"Sure the street is clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Just the same, I'll go out the back way. We'll not give the gum-shoe a chance to return to follow me. My coat and hat, Joseph. I'll be home to-night, when Parr will probably call. Hold him till I come."

The detective went out by a rear door and a way through to the next street. There he, too, found a cab, and was driven to the Grand Central Station, where he took a train, which dropped him at a certain junction, where he found a local which finally brought him to Peabody Center. By mid-afternoon he was at the hotel where Arthur Towne had died.

As far as being the center of anything, Peabody Center seemed more like the jumping-off place. The hotel was a ramshackle, barnlike structure, and the people who kept it were about as dilapidated.

"D'I remember the feller that died here? Waal, I swanny! I'm likely to. Best job he ever did, I reckon. Leastways, a good job for me," remarked the hotel-keeper, his jaw wagging on his cud with the steadiness of a steamboat walking-beam.

"We ain't had sech another customer in two years—no, sir! Paid his bill without no kicking, th' dead man did—er, haw, haw, haw! Reg'lar gentleman. An', b'gee! he paid his doctor's bill. You ax' old Doctor Minders. Guess it startled th' doc some. He's been useter havin' folks offer him er jug o' cider, or some corn on the cob, fer his fees—er, haw, haw, haw! Waal, yes! I kalkerlate I do remember him."

"And his friend, Mr. Cox?" suggested the detective.

"Marcy on us—yes!" declared the hotel-keeper. "He was a nice feller, too. Big, hearty sort of a man. An' although the corpse, *he* paid, we wouldn't none of us got th' money if it hadn't been fer Mr. Cox—nossir! Me, nor the doc, nor Jim Lanna, th' undertaker, would ha' had ter look ter th' taown, I reckon, an' th' taown don't pay much fer pauper-work."

"But Mr. Towne was not a pauper?" cried the questioner.

"Waal, no; Mr. Cox said he warn't. But, by gravy! he didn't look much better when he come here. Y'see, it was this-a-way:

"It rained like kildee that night when Mr. Cox came tootin' along in his automerbile. And he brung this feller with him. If yer axed me I'd say he was er tramp. He'd been down in the mud, all right; but Mr. Cox explained all that.

"Yer see, Mr. Towne had been taken sick, and had got away from him. They was friends. Mr. Cox had overtaken him on the road in a bad way. Sho! he was crazy as a loon when Mr. Cox brought him here."

"Who else was with them?" asked Nick Carter quickly.

"Nobody."

"What? Wasn't there a chauffeur?"

"Heh? Well, there might er been; but they didn't have no words erbout it w'ile they was here—no, sir. They was as friendly as need be, 'ceptin' w'en Mr. Towne was off his nanny with the fever, yer know."

"What I mean is the driver—the chauffeur of the car. Mr. Cox came in an automobile?"

"Yep. But he run it himself. It warn't a big one. He was a travelin' agent of some kind, I reckon. He didn't tell his biz—no."

"But they were friends?"

"Well, mister, you kin be sure they warn't enemies, w'en Cox worked over him the way he did—er, haw, haw, haw! No, they hit it off mighty well. An' he kep' comin' back ter see him ev'ry day, although he had old

Mis' Perkins, as good a nuss as there is in the state; an' Doc Minders stayed around the hotel purt' near all th' time.

"But he was bound ter die. The doc said he must ha' been sickenin' for it quite er spell, though Cox said he hadn't been long off his feed.

"So he died—yessir! in spite of all the doc, and good nussin', could do. Mr. Cox was dretful cut up. He went off and arranged fer his buryin' down ter Alphant, where Mr. Towne useter live, so he said. Then he took him erway, after payin' us all. You bet he was a nice man, that Cox! Mighty nice."

"What kind of a looking man did you say he was?" queried the detective.

"Who—Towne?"

"Oh, he was too sick for you to tell much about him, I presume—eh?"

"That's right, stranger! But he'd been a fine-lookin' man—so my wife said—if he hadn't been down and out. Big man, high forehead, plenty of hair and whiskers. He was a load all right when he was in his box. I know, 'cause I helped to snake him out ter th' waggin."

"And Mr. Cox?"

"Heh?"

"How did he look?"

"Why, mister, I thought yer said yer knew Cox?"

"I want to be sure that it's the right one."

"Well, say! I dunno what yer nosin' erbout. But that Cox was straight goods, all right. He's a travelin' for some big harness-consarn—he told me th' name, but I clean fergot it now. That's what took him off ev'ry day. Otherwise I reckon you wouldn't ha' got him erway from his friend's bed—not much!"

"Well, do you mind telling me what he looked like?"

"Why, no! Not if you ain't got nothin' ergainst him. I tell yer, I wouldn't do Cox a mean trick fer no money—no indeed!"

"I don't blame you, Mr. Spicer. He seems to have done the right thing by his friend."

"And him lookin' more like a tramp at that," declared the hotel-keeper ruminatively. "The doc made us burn his clo'es. But, bless you! they warn't worth a tinker's curse!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Nicholas Carter. "Not such clothing as a gentleman would wear?"

"Waal! They might ha' been in their day."

"Old?"

"P'gee! I dunno's you could tell."

"How's that?"

"Why, mister, he'd been rollin' in th' mud an' ag'in in th' mire! He'd slep' out in th' rain—that's right! He looked like er wanderin' wayfarer that hadn't seen a clean sheet fer a long spell—er, haw, haw, haw!" blatted Mr. Spicer.

"Ha!" muttered the detective thoughtfully.

"But Mr. Cox said he was useter nice things. His gittin' away in his delirium an' wanderin' erbout is what done fer the clo'es—an' him, too, poor feller."

"Well, come now!" exclaimed Nicholas Carter more briskly. "What about the other man?"

"Who, sir?"

"Cox?"

"Oh, yes! How he looked?"

"That's it. I want to be sure that it is the same John Cox I know."

"John Cox—yep. That's the name he give. Well, he was a short man, kinder fat and roly-poly. He'd ha' been jolly if his friend had not been sick—sure."

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed Nick Carter. "Not a big man, too?"

"Why, no. Not what you'd call big. Only kinder fat. Mebbe he was purt' rugged, come ter think of it. He held up his corner of the box w'en we shipped poor Towne."

"What sort of a looking man—in the face?"

"Smooth-faced. Kinder reddish complexion. A lot of hair he had."

"How old should you say, Mr. Spicer?"

"Oh, mebbe thirty-five—mebbe forty. Hard ter tell. His eyes twinkled like he was a boy; but he was some obtuse," observed Mr. Spicer complacently, meaning "obese."

"Well, well," murmured Nicholas Carter thoughtfully, and without even smiling at the hotel-keeper's error.

CHAPTER IX.

SCANNING THE CARDS.

There was much food for reflection in what Nicholas Carter had so far learned regarding the mystery of the empty grave.

The detective's keen mind, trained to the solving of all manner of problems, saw the possibility of a dozen different motives for the conspiracy which seemed to be aimed at Miss Sallie O'Neil and her peace of mind.

For that there was a conspiracy was plain enough; there could be no doubt of it.

Merely the reason for it, and who were the prime-movers in it, and what was to be gained by it, were the queries that buzzed in Carter's brain.

Having established the fact that no body had been buried in Arthur Towne's grave, the next question was, *Was* there a real Arthur Towne?

The story of the sick man the stranger, John Cox, had brought to the Peabody Center hotel did not at all convince Carter that there ever had been such a person in existence as Arthur Towne. At least, he was not sure that the man who had saved Miss Sallie's life, written to her, and had later become engaged to her, legally owned the name of "Arthur Towne."

Taking up this idea first, there was a very plausible explanation of the whole business. Miss O'Neil had been romantic enough to advertise for her rescuer. She had established a correspondence between them.

First along the correspondence had been of a joking, happy-go-lucky nature. Later their trend became more serious. The girl was impetuous and romantic; a man of the world might be led into a mild flirtation with such a frank person as Sallie O'Neil.

Before he knew it this man, calling himself Arthur Towne, had fallen into the innocent mesh of the girl's admiration. He found himself committed to expressed feelings of devotion, *which he had no right to make!*

Possibly the man had a wife and family already; at least, there was some insurmountable obstacle in the way of such engagement and marriage.

Perhaps this obstacle might be far more innocent than the one suggested. Perhaps it might be that the man, having first entered into the correspondence in a spirit of fun, had given an assumed name and was now ashamed to own it; or, perhaps, afraid for some reason to admit his real name.

He had gotten deep into the tangle, however. He had really fallen in love with the girl. At least, he had allowed her to fall in love with him.

And he awoke at last with the full knowledge of the fact that it had got to end!

What would he do? How best to end the thing, and in mercy to the girl?

It was difficult to imagine a man, if he was not overly supplied with the good things of life, throwing over an engagement with a girl worth millions.

Yet the fellow might be, at heart, a person of honor, although trapped into a dishonorable position.

Besides, there was another possibility. If he had given her an alias, and had at first placed himself in an entirely fictitious character, there would be the matter of explaining it all if he ever saw Sallie.

And Miss O'Neil was not a young lady who would tamely brook such an imposition.

She would detest him from that moment—or that would be the first belief of any man. She would hate and despise him.

And perhaps the fellow who called himself Arthur Towne had really learned to love the girl whom he had saved from the sea and had corresponded with so long.

There was probability as well as possibility in that idea.

Then what would the fellow do? To see the girl would be to lose her, and lose her affection and respect as well. It was cruel to make her believe he was dead, yet less cruel than to have her discover his duplicity.

Did Miss Sallie O'Neil believe him dead, the lover would linger in her memory, enshrined as an honorable man. Her own love for him would always seem to her, whether she married in the future or not, a beautiful thing.

But to appear before the impetuous young girl and acknowledge his duplicity, his alias, his unhappy masquerade, would seem to degrade both himself and her.

So "Arthur Towne" might have decided to die—to disappear from the ken of the girl he had wronged. And he planned to do it in a way that, under ordinary circumstances, would have convinced Miss Sallie that he was actually no more.

To this end he had begun to introduce the name of "John Cox" into his later letters. The man was laying plans for the final trump trick he was to play.

As his business brought him nearer New York, and so made impossible the putting off of the evil day much longer when they must meet, perhaps the fellow had no expectation of making his plot bear so much the stamp of truth.

"John Cox" was to write, after a silence, of the death of "Arthur Towne," and the grave was to prove the fact. At first that grave seemed to promise proof enough to the conspirator.

Then there crossed the path of this plotter the man who had been brought ill to the Peabody Center hotel, and who had died there under the name of "Arthur Towne."

Cox had played the good Samaritan with a purpose in view. He had followed that purpose out.

The man he had picked up, delirious and dying, went out of this life under the name of Arthur Towne. He shipped the body to Alphant, but on the way found some means of juggling with the coffin. This was a point that Carter would look into later.

Then the supposed Cox had written enclosing the last words of Towne to his fiancée. Oh, it was as simple as—two and two making twenty-two when they are set side by side!

This was one way in which he read the hand which had been dealt; and, to Nick Carter's astute mind, it was very apt to be an exact reading.

The man who had called himself Towne, and then Cox, was somebody of importance, however, and a person of wealth and great executive ability.

All parties concerned—the family of the girl befooled and her friends—were being shadowed for this stranger. Parr's mission to the detective's house the night before had been suspected, and the astute mind of the plotter had even foreshadowed what Nick Carter would first do if he took up the case.

"The fellow's a wonder! I take off my hat to him," the detective mentally exclaimed. "He knew I'd see where the key to the whole situation lay—in the grave of Arthur Towne. And that the grave proved to be empty, it does not follow that the key wasn't there!" chuckled Carter.

"However, we don't want to run ahead of things. This is taking it all for granted that my deductions regarding the mysterious dual being, Arthur Towne-John Cox, are correct. There may be a flaw in my reasoning. I may have jumped at too many conclusions. There is, in fact," proceeded the detective in his ruminations, "an entirely different way of looking at the whole affair."

With this muttered declaration he lit a new cigar, and, following its wreaths with his visual orb, allowed his mental eye to picture an entirely different explanation of the circumstances and suspicions which hovered about the case.

Cleveland Parr, the secretary of the millionaire director of the Wood Pulp Trust, had impressed Carter as being a perfectly honest and sincere gentleman, and no coward, although he was undeniably timid. But sometimes the most timid person is the bravest when it comes to real endurance and danger.

Carter had taken all the young man's statements at their face value. Up to the present time he had seen no reason for doubting him.

Now, in Cleveland Parr's story he had mentioned young Harold Strusse, the millionaire's son. Young Strusse was not in high favor with the family, not even with his own father at present.

Yet time was when he had been engaged to Mr. Strusse's ward, the rich young woman who was now in such deep affliction. Undoubtedly it had been old Strusse's desire to join the two fortunes under his present control.

And what had Harold done? He had disappointed him. He had kicked over the bucket of milk just as Farmer Strusse had it foaming to the edges!

Strusse did not blame Miss Sallie for breaking the engagement between herself and young Harold. Harold, from that moment, was down in his father's bad books.

Undoubtedly his income was cut, and he was badgered by the old man. Likely old Strusse was dead-sore that his pet plan should have gone astray.

So he vented his spleen on his vicious son. And the vicious son might have turned to vent his spleen on the girl who had thrown him over.

How better—or how worse—might he secure his revenge than by tolling the girl into the very situation she occupied now? This revenge would be worthy of the man whom Parr had termed contemptuously "a cad."

Harold Strusse might have posed as Arthur Towne from the start. Knowing how anxious Sallie was to see again the man who had saved her from drowning at Long Beach, the mean-spirited hound possibly began writing to her—or having some fellow in his pay write to her—in the person of the rescuer.

He had carried on this correspondence with the full intention of making her ridiculous some day in her own and the family's eyes. Then Sallie spoiled that determination by falling in love with her ideal, "Arthur Towne."

Now, whether Harold Strusse had any sneaking feeling of love in some dark corner of his heart or not for his father's pretty and wealthy ward, it was probable that her evident adoration of the fictitious character of Arthur Towne pleased the fool.

He kept up the farce until he saw clearly he would never dare let his father know the part he had played. To make Sallie ridiculous was one thing; to make her suffer shame and mental anguish such as she must endure, did she ever know the truth, was an entirely different matter.

Harold Strusse was evidently holding on to his father's favor by a slender thread. The exposing of this plot he had hatched against Sallie would finish him with the old man.

"The soft-boiled wouldn't be smart enough to do all this himself," declared Nick Carter. "He's had help—good help. A boy less than twenty? Pshaw! *he* wasn't Cox! This hotel-keeper declared the fat man who did this business up there to be thirty-five or forty years old.

"I doubt if a nasty little bounder such as Harold Strusse seems to be—from Parr's account—would have the pluck to carry through all these various schemes. But he might have the cunning to plan them.

"Well," concluded the detective, "that is the second view which may be taken of the conspiracy. Yes, that is the second way to scan the cards.

"There is yet a third possibility. More, perhaps; but there is certain sure one more reading that has the backing of both probability and possibility.

"And that is: Who will be most benefited by the outcome of this plot against Miss O'Neil's peace of mind?"

CHAPTER X.

THE PIVOTAL QUESTION.

The query which Nick Carter had propounded struck directly at the root of the whole matter. He felt it—he knew it; yet he hesitated to put any suspicion of any person, in connection with this third explanation of the problem, directly into words.

The girl Parr declared was suffering deeply. Who was benefited thereby?

That was the pivotal query.

Surely, if the man who had rescued Sallie O'Neil from the surf had done all this, he would have gained nothing but trouble from the result of the game.

Had there been anything for Harold Strusse to make by the transaction? Surely, the fool did not expect to drive Sallie back to him? She was too obstinate a girl—too decided, Parr had affirmed—to change her mind regarding her guardian's son.

Then, who was it who might reap benefit from the present situation?

Parr declared the girl was heart-broken. Her affections had been deeply set upon Arthur Towne. He was confident that it would be years before she would think of marriage again.

Then who might be benefited by her remaining a spinster?

The thought opened a field for supposition into which Nick Carter was not, at this time, prepared to go.

He shook his head, chucked away his half-finished cigar, and answered the supper-bell of the Peabody Center hotel.

Since his arrival he had seen every person who had anything to do with the man who had died, and had interviewed most of those who had even spoken to John Cox.

If he learned anything which at all aided in the final solving of the problem, it did not so appear upon the surface of his mind at this time.

One thing he was assured of. There had been no juggling with the pine box containing the dead typhoid patient at Peabody Center.

Everybody had seen the box put into the express-wagon, and a conversation with the express-agent of the place assured the detective that that particular box was shipped to Alphant.

"The monkey-business, the hocus-pocus, was pulled off at the other end of the route," decided Carter, and he took the evening train back to New York.

When he arrived at his house, he found Cleveland Parr already waiting to see him. Carter knew he was there before he entered, for on the opposite curb were a couple of fellows whom the detective sized up instantly as private agency men.

"Somebody is mightily interested in Cleveland Parr's affairs," muttered the detective, "And, by Jove! it is somebody connected with this game, of course.

"The conspirators have means of learning all that goes on at the Strusse residence. Perhaps it might not be a bad idea if I learned something of the lay of the land there myself."

He said nothing about this surveillance, however, when he greeted Parr.

"Have you got the photo and the letter, Mr. Parr?" was Nick Carter's first question.

"They are here, sir. Miss O'Neil is doubtful as to carrying the investigation any further, however. She feels that the uncertainty of the final outcome only makes the fact of her loss more keen."

"Ah!"

"I have tried, Mr. Carter," said Parr brokenly, "to impress upon her the fact that you so vigorously impressed on me."

"And that is——"

"That Mr. Towne is surely dead; that she will never see him or learn anything further about him."

"You did right," declared Carter.

"I believed so, sir. It is best for her to have no false hopes."

"And don't you entertain any yourself, young man," said the detective quickly. "Arthur Towne is dead."

"You—you speak decidedly."

"Didn't I speak decidedly this morning?"

"Yes. But you speak finally now?"

"I do."

"You have discovered something, then?"

"I have positively discovered that, although Arthur Towne was not buried in that grave we opened, he is, in all human probability, buried somewhere."

"Oh, sir——"

"At least, he is dead," declared Carter.

"Then we may never hope——"

"Scratch that word out of your dictionary, Mr. Parr, in connection with this matter. Arthur Towne is no more. His friend, John Cox, certainly brought him to the hotel at Peabody Center; he was ill there more than a week, and he died there, and was shipped in a plain pine coffin to Alphant—or to the nearest express-office to that village, rather. There can be no gainsaying these facts, Mr. Parr."

Nick Carter said this so earnestly that the other man could not doubt. He turned his face aside, and the detective saw him wipe his eyes.

"A tender-hearted fellow, and devoted to this Sallie O'Neil," thought the detective. "I wonder——"

What he wondered about was not revealed by any further speech at that moment. Carter wrenched his mind from the trail of thought on which it had caught this fleeting scent, and set his wits to the greater task of utilizing the clues which he believed must lay in the letters and photograph which Parr had placed before him.

First of all, he gazed upon the picture. It was, as he had been told, the photograph of the head and shoulders of a man sitting back to the camera.

He was a broad-shouldered man—"beefy" was the mental expression the detective used—with a thick neck that was inclined to roll in a deep wrinkle over his collar. But a thatch of strong, coarse hair hid this defect for the most part—a regular football thatch!

The fellow seemed to have the head and upper works of a large man, sure enough; and the reports of the people at Peabody Center had declared the man who had died there under the name of Arthur Towne to have been a big man.

The figure in the photograph was turned in such a way that not a feature of the face was visible.

"He did that well—he did it well," muttered Nick Carter, still staring at the picture.

"I beg pardon, sir?" questioned Parr.

"Certainly this man hid his identity well, if that chanced to be really a back view of himself."

"Why! I never thought to question the identity of the photograph," said Parr.

"Well, there's a big chance there. But it may be his head and shoulders, just the same. At this time, you say, there was no engagement between the couple?"

"Between Miss Sallie and Mr. Towne?"

"Yes; between Miss Sallie and Mr. Towne," repeated Carter grimly.

"Oh, no, sir! This photograph was sent us soon after the correspondence began. It was only a joke. The letter Miss Sallie let me have to show you is the one that accompanied the picture."

"We'll look at that later," murmured the detective, staring fixedly at the card. "No photographer's name, I see. Mounted on a card such as amateur photographers buy to mount views on. H-m!"

"It was taken by Mr. Cox," remarked Parr.

"Eh?"

"So Mr. Towne said. It was all done for a joke, you know. She had sent him a picture of herself with a heavy veil across her face."

"I understand."

Still Carter stared at the picture, while Parr waited with suppressed eagerness. He saw that the detective had made some discovery.

"What is it, sir?" the young man murmured after a little silence, unable to resist asking the question.

"Why, I'll tell you," drawled Nick Carter. "The man who died of typhoid up there in the country had a heavy crop of whiskers on his face. *This* fellow certainly has no beard."

"Why—no, sir! The beard would show, even if he is back-to."

"That's what it would!"

"Then this surely cannot be a photograph of the man who died!" cried Parr.

"You didn't expect it was, did you, Mr. Parr?" returned Nick Carter crisply.

But his own brows still remained bent, and it was a minute longer before he tossed the card upon the table. Evidently there was something besides this simple discovery that puzzled the detective.

"Let's take a squint at the letters," he remarked carelessly, and picked up the first one, which read as follows:

"To the Veiled Lady:

"Dear Miss—To return good for evil is the advice that the Prayer Book gives all. You have sent me the photograph of an exceedingly pretty gown, a remarkably handsome sunshade, and a charming confection in the French millinery-line. I do not count the veil you chanced to wear, for that I do not fancy at all! See how I keep my side of our bargain to the letter. Anybody who knows me would be sure to recognize it. That I happened to have my back to the camera is a small matter that I know you will overlook. So—tit for tat!

"Sincerely your friend,

"A. Towne."

The handwriting was that of a quick, nervous personality, but the lines flowed easily and the letter was evidently written in haste, and with one dipping of the pen in the ink-well, for the words were heavy at the top and gradually faded, the signature being visible more from the pressure of the pen on the paper than because of the ink itself.

Nick Carter read the screed carefully and made up his mind as to one or two facts about the writer. The detective did not attempt to gain a clear opinion from this letter, for he knew only too well how deceiving handwriting is.

True it is, that the unsuspicious person, writing in his ordinary way, may reveal characteristics by handwriting; but it is also a fact that a man with a facile pen, and on his guard, can so change his penmanship that the keenest decipherer of character by handwriting can scarce distinguish the most pronounced characteristics of the writer.

"A disguised hand—no doubt of it," thought the detective. "But cleverly disguised, and one much used by the writer. Ah-ha! I'd be willing to wager a good deal that this is not the first occasion on which this fellow has used this same hand. He has had occasion to disguise his penmanship long before he began this correspondence with Miss Sallie O'Neil. I'll take my oath on that!"

But without expressing these thoughts audibly, Nick Carter placed this letter to one side and picked up the other. Two more diametrically opposite handwritings could scarce be imagined.

This purporting to come from "John Cox" was a crabbed hand, the letters ill-formed, not a graceful thing about it. It was a boyish hand, too, crudely formed upon the old "round text" taught in school from thirty to fifty years ago. It was a penmanship which, at first blush, seemed to be that of a person much unusued to grasping the pen.

The letter itself, however, was made up of good business English, and there was no fault to find with the spelling. The person writing was no ignoramus.

It was couched in the briefest, coldest terms, as though the writer had not the least interest in the person to whom he wrote, or in her affairs.

It was the letter of an utter stranger to an utter stranger, and Nick Carter read it carefully:

"Miss Sallie J. O'Neil:

"Dear Madam—The enclosed letter I found among effects of my friend, Arthur Towne, and as it was sealed and addressed, I am sending it to you. Mr. Towne died on Thursday last, after a brief illness—typhoid—at the hotel in Peabody Center, and it was my mournful privilege to lay him away in the cemetery in Alphant, N. Y., near which village he was, I believe, born.

"Respectfully yours,

"John Cox."

"You have read it, Mr. Carter?" murmured Parr.

Nick Carter nodded.

"You can imagine the shock that Miss Sallie experienced when she opened and read this, all unprepared as she was. Of course, she had been worried by Towne's silence; but the shock was nevertheless keen."

"So I should presume."

"It was at the breakfast-table. She fainted dead away; I believe it was a weakness she had never given way to before in her life. She is a rugged, out-of-door girl, Mr. Carter."

"And how did the others take it?" queried the detective quietly.

"Eh?"

"You were all at the table?"

"All but Mr. Strusse. He had gone into his den to glance through his own letters before giving me such as he wished me to answer."

"Humph!" muttered Carter.

"Mr. Daggett ran and picked her up and went upstairs with her," proceeded Mr. Parr, when the detective stopped him by raising his hand.

"You're speaking of the millionaire's nephew?" he asked softly.

"Certainly, sir. Mr. Ben Daggett."

"Carried her up-stairs?"

"He would not let anybody else touch her. He is as strong as a bull."

"Ah!"

"She was a light weight for him, although Miss Sallie is a well-proportioned woman."

"This Daggett is a big fellow, then?"

"More than six feet, sir. And a handsome man—as fine a fellow as I know," observed Cleveland Parr with some enthusiasm.

"Very well. Now, you all saw this letter. Did Miss Sallie show you the one which was enclosed with it. The last, I suppose, from Arthur Towne?"

"No, sir. Only Mr. Strusse saw that. He had spoken warmly against the fellow. Said he feared he was a scamp. That was before this dreadful message from Cox came."

"Yes?"

"He—Mr. Strusse—told me that the letter convinced him that Towne had really been ill when he wrote it. He was evidently stricken down before he could stamp and mail the epistle."

"Yes?" repeated Carter encouragingly, still studying the crabbed writing of the second letter.

"In Towne's last letter he mentioned hoping that his friend Cox would overtake him before he felt any worse. He did not say exactly where the letter was written. But it could not have been far from Peabody Center."

"That is, if we are to accept the premise that there ever was an Arthur Towne, and that the whole hanged thing isn't as dirty a plant as ever I saw!" ejaculated Nick Carter, with sudden vehemence.

CHAPTER XI.

AN INVITATION TO DINE.

"Mr. Carter!" exclaimed Parr, leaping up.

The detective looked at him calmly, after his momentary outburst.

"You certainly have put your suspicions into plain language at last."

"Have I, Mr. Parr?"

"Yes, sir. We were speaking of Mr. Ben Daggett. He is a big man, I acknowledge; and this picture is of a broad-shouldered man—a big man—without doubt.

"But you go too far, sir! Mr. Daggett is the soul of honor. He comes of a family that counts on its roster the names of many, many noted and honorable men——"

"And his father was the confessed wrecker of a bank, twenty-odd years ago," suggested Carter, but with an odd smile.

"I do not know much about that, sir," declared Parr, his face flaming. "He may have been helped by other men, who were shielded by his suicide. And the letter he wrote acknowledging his guilt was so vague that it might have been the work of a madman—or, at least, of a man whose mind was overbalanced."

At his words Nick Carter's brow contracted again and his eyes sparkled.

"You seem to be very confident about this, Mr. Parr?" he said.

"I am!"

"Have you seen the letter?"

"The one Mr. Daggett left when he—he died?"

"The one penned by the suicide a few minutes before he died—yes."

"I *have* seen it."

"Who has it?"

"Mr. Ben Daggett."

"Ah!"

"His mother bequeathed it to him."

"Indeed?"

"You know, she would never believe that her husband was at all at fault. She declared it was a plot hatched against him by others—those who profited by the wreck."

"Well, that couldn't have included her brother?"

"Mr. Strusse? No, indeed! But because he would not try to institute legal proceedings against men interested in the bank, she was angry with Mr. Strusse. His settling the matter by making good the depositors' losses did not change Mrs. Daggett's attitude toward him."

"Humph—ha! Very interesting, I have no doubt, Mr. Parr," said Nick Carter, with a quiet smile. "But we are not discussing the wrecking of the old North Side Bank. That is ancient history."

"I beg your pardon, sir! But Mr. Daggett—young Mr. Daggett—is my friend——"

"And you are loyal to your friends, Mr. Parr."

"I am not an ingrate, sir. And I believe, with all your

keenness, you are doing an innocent man a grave wrong to suspect him."

"Have I said I suspect him?" queried Carter.

Parr hesitated and flushed.

"Well, sir, we had spoken of Ben, and then you spoke so vigorously of it's all having been a plot——"

"Which it was."

"I agree with you heartily there, sir."

"But I didn't intimate that I considered Mr. Daggett the aggressor," said Nick Carter coolly.

"Who, then, do you mean?"

"I don't know as I am convinced regarding the identity of the person—or persons—who have hatched this dastardly plot against Miss O'Neil's peace of mind."

"Then you absolutely believe that there never was such a person as Arthur Towne?"

"I have intimated as much already."

"Or John Cox?"

"Likewise an alias."

"Then who——"

"Don't ask me that!" exclaimed Carter, who was studying the two letters again. "Here! I'll tell you one thing, and put you on your guard: Whoever is engineering this plot is close enough to Mr. Strusse's household to know what goes on there, and all about you. You are being followed wherever you go. It is known, of course, that you represent Miss Sallie O'Neil in trying to solve the mystery of the empty grave. I shall be followed and watched, too. So we might as well play the remainder of this game out in the open, or most of it. Now, Mr. Parr, you are to do one more thing for me. Tell Miss O'Neil as little as you possibly can of our discoveries."

"Goodness me, Mr. Carter!" exclaimed Parr. "I—I don't know as I really know what discoveries we have made. You puzzle me so!"

Nick Carter chuckled hugely at this.

"Just as well," he said. "The less you know the less you'll have to relate. But tell enough to the girl to get her interested in me."

"Eh?"

"Oh, that surprises you, does it?" laughed the detective. "Because I am a detective, may I not be allowed to have some interest in a fine woman?"

"I do not understand you, sir," said Parr stiffly.

"I'll explain. I want you to interest Miss Sallie in me sufficiently for her to invite me to dinner."

"Mr. Carter!"

"Quite so. To-morrow night, if possible."

"But, sir! She is not entertaining."

"Have her entertain me."

"I do not understand you."

"Mr. Parr!" exclaimed the detective. "Is that absolutely necessary? You, at least, understand my meaning."

"Well, but——"

"Tell Miss Sallie that, however much she may dislike to do it, I must meet her. I cannot come to call on her without an invitation. And I prefer to dine—*en famille* you understand. It will give me a chance to see everybody, including the servants, who may have it in their power to aid the plotters with inside information."

"Oh—I—see!" burst from Parr, at length, showing that he was, in fact, completely blinded to the detective's real meaning.

"I thought you'd see the point," said Carter dryly, hiding a smile.

"But it will be hard to convince her of the advisability of such a thing," said Parr.

"Tell her I will throw up the entire matter just where it is if she does not invite me to dine."

"But she has not been entertaining since this dreadful thing happened. Her fiancé, you know——"

"It will shake her out of herself and do her good. That sounds harsh, perhaps, but it is a fact. You know yourself, Mr. Parr, that to give way to either worriment or sorrow will not improve either her condition or help in the matter itself."

"No, sir. You are right."

"Then throw your influence heartily on my side."

"I will try, sir."

"And you must succeed, Parr, if you want me to follow this matter to any conclusion whatsoever."

"Very well, sir."

"And now, Mr. Parr, before you go, I will give you one more bit of information," said Nick Carter, picking up the letters and the photograph. "Two bits, in fact."

"Yes, sir?" cried Parr eagerly.

Carter's finger pointed to the back of the head displayed in the photograph.

"Do you see that hair, sir?"

"Why, yes, sir!"

"That hair is false, Mr. Parr. The man was wearing a wig!"

Parr was speechless with amazement. Before he could audibly express his feeling, Carter shook the two letters before him.

"And these letters, Mr. Parr!" cried the detective, "these letters were written by the same hand! If they weren't, by Jove! I'll eat them!"

CHAPTER XII.

ARRANGING THE CARDS.

Nick Carter had need of an automobile that next morning. His old one he had sacrificed at the river two nights before, and charged it to "profit and loss."

But he had another in a certain garage up-town, and Danny, who was still driving for him, and he met at the place before nine o'clock, having left the house by separate ways and in disguise, so that any "gum-shoe" who might be watching the detective or his chauffeur would be left watching an empty nest.

Both being sure that they were not followed, they hastened to get the machine out, and were soon scooting through the Bronx toward Westchester and the vicinity of Alphant Valley.

Carter had learned through the newspapers that his old car was a complete wreck; and, anyway, he did not propose to lay claim to it. He could better afford the loss than to have his private affairs looked into by the regular police-force.

The papers were still giving considerable space to the mystery of the grave-robbery, and the identity of the men who were supposed to have gone into the river with the wrecked motor-car. But when the detective and his man crossed the identical bridge and traveled up the Sudder's Hill road this morning, naturally nobody identified them.

Beyond the ridge of the hill, and on the Alphant side, was a cross-road that led direct to the little railway-station, nearest to the quiet village cemetery where the box of ice had been buried instead of the body of the fictitious Arthur Towne.

It was to this station—Maidenwood—that the box containing the actual body of the dead man had been billed. It was a quiet spot, and the station-agent, who acted in capacity of express-agent and a dozen other things as well, had plenty of time to talk.

He was especially garrulous after he had been liberally tipped by the detective.

"Do I remember the coffin coming here? Well, I should say! And that was the very one they dug up and stole the body from, heh?" he observed. "I tell you, these young medical-squirts are nervy cusses, ain't they? Couldn't git me in a churchyard at night, let alone breaking into a coffin!

"I remember the day, all right. It's down on the book, anyway. First time I ever handled one o' them things, too. And I've been here ten year, or better. Well, it came, and on the train with it was the chap who was tending to the burying. Yes, he was down here the day before, and made all the arrangements.

"He'd hired Bill Gregson's horse and wagon. When he and the corpse got here, there was some hitch over what he should pay Bill. Bill was too busy to go over with him to Alphant, anyway.

"So the chap said he'd drive himself. Eh? His name was Cox—yes. John Cox was what he signed.

"Gee! that's him—as plain as life. I know him, if he *is* back-to," declared the agent, staring at a photograph that the detective had flashed on him.

"Must be something funny about this, heh?" queried the curious agent. "Hadn't been robbin' nobody and hiding the vallibles in the coffin, had he? I heard tell of such doin's once.

"Well, he drove off with the box by himself. And he was gone till evening. I hear they had quite a fun'ral over to Alphant. Elder Summers is a master-hand on such an occasion.

"He come back an' paid Bill Gregson, and shook hands with me—he's a mighty pleasant-spoken man, this John Cox——"

"How old should you call him?" queried Carter.

"Oh, mebbe forty. About my age."

"Tall?"

"No, no! Not above my height. But a nation sight bigger. He's a man weighing near two hundred pounds, I should judge. Very red face."

"In-deed!" exclaimed Mr. Carter.

Having learned all that seemed important from this man, the detective called on Bill Gregson, the neighboring farmer, who had rented his horse and wagon to transport the corpse of "Arthur Towne" to the graveyard.

"Yes, the feller driv' over alone with it," said Gregson. "You know, the hearse is kep' in a shed just before you get to Alphant. Belongs to Henry Crandall. Belonged to his father. Belonged to his gran'ther.

"Each generation paints it up an' varnishes it, an' keeps it in use. Fer folks will die, even aout here. Though they're mostly aged when they do.

"Well!" said Gregson, thoughtfully turning the tobacco in his cheek, "I can't give you any more informa-

tion than that, I guess. The coffin was a good heft, and it's hilly by the main road to Alphant. I advised him to go the lower road, which is longer, but easier on the hoss. An' he done it."

"Where's this lower road?" asked the detective.

"Why, you pass to the left of Goudy's and keep on through the woods. Goes by Goudy's ice-house. That's on the aidge of the pond. You can't miss of it!"

"Getting information out of the gentle hayseed is like pulling an elephant's teeth, Danny," remarked Carter, as they went on in the car. "But one thing about it: you always get all the details, if you wait long enough."

They took the lower road and called on Mr. Goudy. Did he see a man go through there on such and such a day in a wagon, with a box in the wagon?

"Why, I swun!" said Goudy, smiting his thigh with a palm of leather. "That's funny. I been speakin' of that to m' wife.

"Folks said there was a fun'ral that day up to the church, an' the corpse was took over in Bill Gregson's waggin. I seen that waggin of Bill's; but I didn't see no coffin inter it—no, sir!

"The feller that drove it—a stranger he was ter *me*—told me he an' some friends was campin' up the other side of Spoon Lake, and he wanted some ice. They was goin' ter send some fish down to the city.

"I reckoned they was trap-catchers, but it warn't none of my business. He paid me fer two hundred pounds of ice—good measure, too—an' drove away. But he didn't have no coffin—not if that's the chap you mean."

"Really, Danny, it's too ridiculous to go any farther," remarked Nick Carter, as he stepped into the automobile once more. "We are wasting time, and my ears ring from listening to these fellows gab. The case is completed. Why bother more about it? You can turn around, Danny. Go home! And meanwhile, I'll sit here in the back and arrange the cards."

Two hours later Nick Carter entered his house, and found waiting for him on his desk a letter enclosed in a monogramed envelope. He smiled as he broke it open and read the note enclosed:

"MR. NICHOLAS CARTER—It will give both Mr. Strusse, my guardian, and myself pleasure to have you dine with us this evening, at 7 o'clock.

"Faithfully yours,
"SALLIE J. O'NEIL."

"I most certainly shall go!" chuckled Nick Carter, tossing the letter upon the table. "But regarding the pleasure—well, on this occasion I fancy the pleasure will all be mine!" he added grimly.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VILLAIN TRUMPS.

"Yes," said Nicholas Carter gravely, "I was very well acquainted with your father, General O'Neil, at one time, Miss Sallie. You and I should be like old friends," and he smiled at the beautiful girl, who, in her simple black dress, shone like a star in the place of honor at her guardian's board.

There was only one other lady present—Mrs. Jennison, Miss Sallie's old governess and companion. The dining-room of the Strusse mansion on Riverside Drive was a brilliant apartment. And there was an interesting company at the board.

At least, every member of the little family party was interesting to the detective. And ere this point in the dinner, he had keenly scrutinized each person at the table.

Miss Sallie herself, although her face was sad and her eyes showed traces of tears, was really a most beautiful and attractive girl. She was finely formed and tastefully dressed, and her conversation betrayed a cultivated and broadened mind.

Nick Carter agreed with all Cleveland Parr's enthusiastic praise of the girl. She was breezy, without being loud; frank, without being tactless.

Altogether Carter had seldom met so interesting a girl of scarce twenty-one years of age.

Her companion was a colorless old lady, who was no addition to the society of the dining-table, that was sure.

Nick sat on Miss Sallie's right-hand. Across the table from him was a handsome man, with a keen, intelligent face, a splendid head topping an athlete's body. This was the man whom Parr had defended so warmly—Ben Daggett.

The detective had eyed him with growing pleasure.

"I don't blame Parr for fancying the young dog," muttered the detective. "He's an attractive fellow, that's sure.

"If his father *was* a thief—a bank-wrecker—the son is a thoroughbred! I pass him. He would not stoop to demean himself by such a dastardly plot as this aimed against the girl.

"And, by Jove! unless I am blind, the way he looks at her tells another story. He's in love with Sallie, or I'm a soft-clam! We'll eliminate him from the possible plotters."

On the other side of Mrs. Jennison was a sallow, flaxen-haired youth, with a silly smile and a bloodshot eye. He was occasionally brow-beaten by Mr. Strusse. It was evident that Strusse pere was not in love with his son and heir.

"That soft-boiled wouldn't have the head to plan this business," decided the detective instantly. "He has none of the attributes that have made the old man successful.

"By Jove! he's a weakling. He might hate hard enough, but he wouldn't have the power to carry through such a plot. He wouldn't have cuteness in his little brain to plan it. And he lacks every atom of executive ability.

"And there's Parr himself——"

The detective's eyes wandered to the secretary, who sat beside the elder Strusse. He was a whole-souled fellow—or appeared to be—and must be deeply interested in Miss Sallie's well-being.

"Not likely to be the criminal," grunted Nick Carter. "Not shrewd enough. Humph!"

And so the dinner came to an end. Mr. Daggett begged Mr. Carter to excuse him. He had a prior engagement for the evening.

Young Strusse lounged out without offering any excuse.

Mr. Parr had his duties to attend to.

"We'll join you in the drawing-room later, puss," said Mr. Strusse, as the girl passed behind him and fondly dropped a kiss upon his shiny bald head.

"All right, guardy."

"I'll entertain Mr. Carter for a while with a cigar and as good a highball as ever wet his whistle, if he doesn't mind drinking one after dinner."

Mr. Carter smiled enigmatically, and followed his host into the room he called his "den."

"Sit down," said Strusse gruffly, the instant the door was closed.

"Thanks," drawled the detective. "I don't care if I do."

The millionaire deposited himself with a thump in a big chair at his desk. He was a heavy, thick-set man, with a very bald head, fair complexion, and where his beard showed at all it proved that if it was grown it would be sandy.

Mr. Strusse had wonderfully thick shoulders and chest, and his neck was fat and wrinkled over his collar. His little eyes glimmered uglily now that he and the detective were alone.

"Well!" he barked. "How much have you learned about this business of the disappearance of Towne?"

"You know I was investigating—yes?" queried Carter mildly.

"My ward—er—just told me."

"Well, Mr. Strusse, my case is complete."

"Huh!"

"Would you like me to place the points before you, before I relate them to Miss O'Neil, eh?"

"Hang you!" ejaculated the old gentleman. "Out with it! Say what you want, and I'll——"

Nick Carter stiffened in his chair, and his arm shot out with the index-finger pointing directly at the wrathful face of the millionaire. His own countenance was black with sudden passion.

"Don't you intimate that you can buy me, sir!" he ground out between his teeth. "Listen to me!

"I've got the story of the deceitfulness of a trusted friend to tell that girl, perhaps. I've got to rip away the cloak of goodness that she believes covers that person she loves. It's not a nice job. To get my hands on you, sir, first, might give me stomach for it!"

"Why, you——" stammered Strusse.

"Shut up! You villain, you! I can see every move you've made in this contemptible game, and I know your motive to the very last breath.

"You couldn't bring about a match between your son and this girl, so you determined to fix it so that she should not marry—at least, not before the will of her father gave the money he left her into her hands. And if she remains unmarried beyond that time, she'll probably not ask for an accounting from you.

"I've done some investigating of your affairs, Mr. Strusse. I've found to my own satisfaction that you have not misappropriated her funds. They're safe—at present. But you are determined not to give up the fortune she possesses, because it gives you a great deal of power in the financial world."

"You know a deal too much," muttered Strusse, dropping his eyes before Carter's gaze.

"No, sir. Just enough. Now, having failed in making the girl marry that pimple on the face of nature—your

son—you hatched this scheme. You wrote all those letters. You were Arthur Towne. You were John Cox. Despite your disguise, I could find a dozen people who would identify you.

"You knew only too well the loving, faithful nature of the girl. You knew her so well, and were so consummate in your art, that you made her fall in love with you while posing as her rescuer.

"And now you have killed her lover, and, by Jove! have well-nigh broken her heart into the bargain. You believe she will worship at the shrine of this mysterious Arthur Towne for years to come——"

"And she will, by thunder!" growled out the millionaire suddenly. "I want to see you prevent it!"

Nick Carter looked at him, biting his lips with rage.

"Yes, sir! I want to see you prevent it, Mr. Carter! If you go to her and tell her all this, will you help the matter any? If you can make her believe such things against me—which I deny—she will be utterly prostrated by the blow.

"I know Sallie, Mr. Carter. I know her better than you do. If she came to believe that I had done this, she would be more heart-broken than she is over the loss of her—er—lover.

"She and I are the best of friends. Bless you! I think the world of the girl. I wouldn't let that rascal of a son of mine marry her. No, sir!

"I'm too old a man to marry her myself. But, by thunder! I'm going to handle her money for some years to come. And you, Mr. Detective, or a dozen men like you, won't stop me!

"Tell her all about it—if you dare. Prove it to her—if you can. But you'll only be bringing a heavier sorrow upon her, and you'll merely secure my hold the more on her fortune.

"For it is absolutely in my control, and I have done nothing which can be considered a good reason by the courts for ousting me. Besides, she would have to make the first move to that end, and she wouldn't do it—not in a thousand years!

"Now, what do you think of that, Mr. Detective? Granting you can prove all this you think you have discovered against me, what satisfaction is it going to be to you to tell her, and what better off will she be when you do?

"Why, she'll be worse off! I'd be dead-sure she wouldn't listen to another man's wooing for ten years to come!

"Bah, Mr. Carter! You are the shrewdest detective in the business to-day, I grant you. I knew when that fool, Parr, went to you, that in the end you'd get me. You always get those whom you go after.

"But in me you've caught a Tartar. You've found me out, we'll say, but to what end? It's not going to do you a bit of good to cut up rough about it.

"We're a very happy family here. My ward loves me, and you will simply sour her against all humanity if you stir up this trouble. What do you think, Mr. Carter?"

Nick Carter rose, folded his arms, and looked down upon the fat man in the big chair.

"What do I think?" he repeated. "I think, Mr. Strusse, that you are as cold-blooded a scoundrel as it was every my fortune to meet.

"I think, too, that you are perfectly right. I would do more harm than good, at present, by telling Miss Sallie the truth.

"I think, in addition, that I shall cross your path again some time, Mr. Strusse, and on that occasion the trumps will be in my hands."

"How melodramatic, Mr. Carter!" laughed the millionaire. "What else?"

"I think—that we will now join Miss O'Neil in the drawing-room. I don't like your company, Mr. Strusse."

That evening he assured the beautiful girl, and Parr, that he had followed the threads of the mystery of the empty grave to a blank wall. He had established to Miss Sallie's satisfaction that Arthur Towne was dead.

Where he had been really buried, and why his friend, "John Cox," had hidden the body, he could not say.

"But I advise you, Miss O'Neil, to let the matter rest," he said; "for the present, at least. 'Let sleeping dogs lie.' You will only keep your own heart sore by further endeavor."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter. When you say so, it must be true."

And she excused herself and went away to her own room in tears. Nick Carter went home in a brown study.

"So ends the case," he said reflectively. "I could have stirred up a mess for the whole family, but, as that cold-blooded scoundrel said, 'What's the use?' At least, I got at the bottom of the mystery of the empty grave."

THE END.

The next number (575) will be "The Yellow Beryl; or, Patsy Brings a High Roller to Book."

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

NEW YORK, December 28, 1907.

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

"I have a client," said a lawyer recently to a reporter, "whose faith and credulity should be restrained. There are many such persons all over the country, who seem desirous of being gulled.

"Every once in a while one of these schemes of obtaining money under false pretenses, always morally and frequently legally wrong, is exposed in the press to good effect.

"There are many of these nets into which the dollars of the duped fly. Of the schemes, one of the most popular is the alleged 'contests' of jumbled words or letters. All offer 'prizes' to the 'winners.' If these propositions are carefully read it will be observed that a 'date' is always set when the 'competition' will end, and that the person addressed will miss 'half his life' if he does not enter into the 'contest' forthwith. Some of these alleged contests are 'free,' others requiring the payment of a sum of money to 'enter.'

"This client of mine went into one of these contests, sent on a dollar, and then consulted me. I advised him to let his money go and not to exercise his brain in arranging jumbled words in the future. He handed me a letter he had received, which read something like this:

"'ESTEEMED FRIEND: Some time ago you answered our jumbled-letter contest. Promptly on receipt of same we notified you that you were one of the successful contestants. Since then we have not received a line from you. Now, as several letters have come back to us misdirected, we thought that yours might be one of them, for we feel quite sure that had you received our letter we would have had an answer ere this, as the puzzle was such a hard one that those who succeeded in solving the same can congratulate themselves. The only condition imposed is that you will forward $1 as a subscription to our magazine, and you may have a beautiful premium as well.

"'Remember that this is the only condition, and if you do not send us $1 you will positively have no standing in the contest and your answer will have no consideration. Do not miss this opportunity—one which you will never have again the longest day you live. So send $1 by return mail. Remember that we are not to be classed with other puzzle-propounders,' etc. etc.

"Rich, isn't it? Yet there are people by the thousands all over the country who are daily taken in by such dead open-and-shut grab-bags for obtaining money. Some of them are swindles and are receiving the attention of the government to the extent that their mail is stopped. Others, like this one, sail along the edge of actual fraud, as the fish when landed receives an *alleged* magazine or something which is not actually fraudulent, for his money. At the same time, in this case, if the amount were large enough to warrant a suit, I believe that these concerns could be reached by legal process. I need scarcely add that *all* of the 'contestants' answering are informed that they are 'successful.' That's the bait at which they bite and their dollar landed, while the 'hard' puzzles are so simple that any child can solve them."

The lumbermen of the backwoods are very fond of playing practical jokes. One of the most dangerous, although the most popular, is that known as "chopping him down."

Any stranger who appears simple enough to be caught is invited to climb a tall tree to take observations or enjoy a remarkable view. No sooner has he reached the top than two or three vigorous axmen attack the tree at its base. Long before he can reach the ground, the tree begins to topple. As a general rule, the heavy branches so break the fall of the tree that the victim finds himself uninjured. There are cases, however, where men have been crippled for life.

A sportsman visiting a logging-camp was once trapped in this way. He climbed a magnificent pine-tree. No sooner was he well up among the branches when the men set to work with axes.

The hunter thanked them for their attention, and climbed a few feet farther up, to secure a position which he saw would be a safe one when the tree should fall. As he did so, he perceived, with a gasp and a tremor, that he was not alone in the tree.

There, not ten feet above him, stretched at full length along a branch, was a huge panther. From the men below his form was quite concealed. In spite of his own predicament, the sportsman laughed to himself as he thought how his tormentors would be taken aback when that animal landed among them.

The great mass of foliage made the fall a comparatively slow one. Then came the final thunderous crash, and in an instant he found himself on the ground, jarred but unhurt.

The next instant there was another roar, overwhelming the laughter of the woodsmen; and out of the boughs shot the panther like a whirlwind. He turned half-round and greeted his enemies with one terrific snarl, and then bounded off into the forest at a pace which made it useless to pursue him.

The men at first were inclined to think that the hunter had conjured up the panther for the occasion. For his part, he merely promised them that if ever again he got into a tree with a panther he would send for them at once.

A FEARFUL ENCOUNTER.

BY JACKSON BANKER.

"So, then, you got those wounds from a jaguar?" I said to Jack Staples, a stout young sailor, who, although but twenty-four years of age, had already seen much of the world.

He had stripped up his sleeve and thrown open the bosom of his blue flannel shirt, to let me see his scars; and, in very truth, they were fearful ones.

"Yes," he replied. "As I was saying, I got these from a jaguar—a sort of spotted demon, such as I hope you will never have a hand-to-claw encounter with."

"When and where did it happen, Jack?"

"It happened about seven years ago, when I was seventeen, and the place was a mission-station in Brazil, a little to the southward of Cape St. Roque."

"You went ashore there from your vessel, I suppose?"

"I went ashore there with my vessel. She carried me ashore, and was dashed all to pieces under my feet. For six months I lived with a missionary and his family.

"They were named Ackley. Mrs. Ackley was a beautiful woman, both in mind and person, and the children were perfect little pictures.

"I made myself as useful as I could; and the parents seemed glad to have me about, because I was an Englishman, while the children became very much attached to me, as I did to them.

"They wanted 'Jack' with them everywhere, and I've wondered since how they were getting on without me—they did so delight to show 'Jack' everything they found and tell him everything they thought.

"There were three of them—a boy and two girls, of ages ranging from four to eight years, the boy being the oldest.

"Mrs. Ackley herself was a well-read woman, and I believe she turned her excellent education to the very best account.

"Both she and her husband had a great dread of jaguars, as every one has in the country parts of Brazil, and they told me of several instances where people had been killed by those animals.

"A pupil of theirs, an Indian boy, they said, had been carried off by one not a year before, and, although a number of persons saw the tragedy, there was no help for the poor lad.

"The animal's head was held high, and he leaped away with his victim as a cat might do with a large rat.

"Mr. Ackley said he supposed the jaguar to be the most terrible creature in the world, excepting the Bengal tiger, and he added that he made this exception only because the tiger was the larger of the two, for he really believed the Brazilian beast to be the fiercer.

"The mother always had a fear that her little ones might stray too far from the house, and fall victims either to the jaguar or some great snake, for it was known that snakes, thirty feet long, were by no means uncommon in the forest.

"Perhaps it was a presentiment she had, for, sure enough, when I had been there about four months, the children did get lost.

"Mrs. Ackley had been up all the night before with a sick Portuguese child that belonged to a family living a short distance from us, and that afternoon she lay down to take a nap.

"She slept for several hours, and when she awoke the little ones were all gone, and nobody could tell what had become of them.

"Her husband and myself were away that afternoon, and when we came home we found the whole neighborhood in commotion.

"The women and girls were clustered together, talking of the matter, while the men had gone to search through the woods.

"Mrs. Ackley was out somewhere with them, and we knew she must be nearly frantic, for it was already sunset, and soon it would be so dark as to make anything like a hopeful search impossible.

"The poor mother herself was likely at any moment to be seized by a jaguar, but probably this thought hardly occured to her.

"It was only of her children that she was thinking, and of the certainty that they could not pass a whole night in those deep woods without fearful danger.

"The snake, the jaguar, the mountain-cat were all there, and what a place for the poor little, tired wanderers to lie down and sleep, with the night all about them.

"No doubt she could imagine them calling her, all in vain, among the great trees, and even by this call attracting the notice of some wild beast that would prick up its ears and come prowling toward them.

"Most of the searchers went home after dark, but a few of us remained in the woods all night, kindling fires and going about with lighted torches, thinking that if the children were anywhere near, they might possibly see the lights, and that, at all events, the fires and torches might serve to frighten away the dangerous animals.

"Neither Mr. Ackley nor his wife rested for a moment during the whole night, and I am sure that I didn't.

"We could generally see each other's torches, and sometimes called to one another.

"Now and then we would all shout, hoping the children might hear us, but there was never any answer.

"In the morning I separated from the others, and wandered so far that it began to seem to me like foolishness to look for such small children at such a distance from their starting-point.

"'That little four-year-old never could have got as far as this,' I reasoned.

"But I had now come to some comparatively open ground, through which ran a hollow, affording a sort of natural pathway.

"Seeing here a spot of bare gravel, I scanned it closely, and I can hardly tell you how I felt upon discovering in it the prints of little naked feet.

"There were three pairs of those little feet, varying in size, and I knew there could be no mistake—I had struck the trail of the innocent little truants.

"Here Arty had trodden, there Annie; and right between the two had tottered along four-year-old Maud.

"I ran on as fast as possible, and in all the gravelly spots I could detect the same foot-prints.

"At last I saw ahead of me an old, tumble-down log hut, which looked as if it had been deserted for a long time.

"Such deserted huts are quite common in Brazil, having been put up for temporary use by people employed in the woods; but I had never seen this one until then.

"I thought it probable that the children would be found there, and so hurried on, full of hope.

"As I neared the hut, what were my feelings upon seeing two jaguars come out from some bushes at a little distance and make directly toward it.

"The hut was between them and me, and I darted behind it, the doorway being on the opposite side.

"I carried an old flintlock-musket, loaded with buckshot, and, as they came bounding toward me, the nearest one got the whole charge in her face when she was only ten or twelve yards off.

"The other was a number of yards behind, and, as he rushed on, I dodged round the hut and in at the doorway.

"I think the brute must have stopped upon getting round to the rear, not knowing what had become of me; for there was an interval of a minute or so before he made his appearance at the front.

"That little delay saved my life; and it saved other lives, too, a great deal more precious than mine; for there, right before me, were the three children, just starting up from the hard earth floor, frightened half to death by the tremendous report of the old musket so close to their ears.

"My greatest fear, as I darted round the house, had been that I should find no means of closing the entrance; but, to my relief, I saw what had served for a door leaning against the logs on the inside.

"It consisted of two mahogany slabs fastened to cross-pieces by withes.

"With a desperation that made the heavy wood seem as light as a feather, I clapped it in place and braced it with a logwood pole which lay on the ground within, and which had probably been used for the same purpose before.

"Then the jaguar came tearing round to the front, uttering terrible growls. I was about attempting to reload my musket, when, to my dismay, I discovered that the flint was gone from the lock, having probably dropped out at the moment of my firing.

"The savage animal was perfectly furious.

"He ran round the hut, thrusting his spotted paws through the chinks between the logs to the whole length of his strong, supple forelegs, and trying to tear away the hard wood with his teeth.

"At length, throwing his weight against the door, which did not fit very snugly to its place, he pushed it aside so that for a moment my heart leaped to my throat.

"For a few minutes I worked as I never worked before.

"It was then that I got this rake down my arm.

"The big claw cut the flesh to the bone from the shoulder to wrist.

"But I didn't feel it; I shouldn't have known that I was hurt but for the blood, which ran all over me.

"At last I secured the door, and then he ran round the hut and began trying the chinks again.

"I told the children to stand in the middle of the little room, for it was only about eight feet square, and that paw seemed to stretch out wonderfully.

"I was afraid he might leap on the top of the old shanty and try there; but he didn't, or he would certainly have torn away the light roof and been down upon us.

"After a while I heard a voice at some distance like that of a person calling to some one.

"I looked through a chink and saw Mr. Ackley coming.

"He was calling to his wife, warning her to keep back.

"He had his gun with him, but he knew no more about shooting than a sailor knows about haying.

"The jaguar left the hut, and ran, in a crouching way, to a little bush, where it lay flat, waiting for its prey to come up.

"I shouted to Mr. Ackley not to venture any nearer, for I did not know what else to do; although it was certain that, should he retreat, the beast would give chase.

"The man hesitated a little, but he was thinking of his children, and in a moment or two he began to step forward.

"I could see the jaguar's spotted haunches work, where he lay, like those of a cat when on the point of making a run for a bird.

"I must do something, for I felt almost sure that the missionary would miss his mark, and this would mean certain death.

"In an instant I tore the door aside and ran out, hoping to attract the beast's attention, and then be able to retreat into my fortress in time to escape from him.

"He turned at my shouts, and sprang toward me with surprising bounds.

"To my horror, I saw that the children had followed me out.

"I could have made my own escape, but I tried to gather them all in my arms at once, and just outside of the door we fell in a heap together.

"I saw the jaguar only ten feet off, and threw myself in his way, shouting:

"'Run, children, run!'

"The next instant I was dashed to the ground from which I had just sprung up, and two rows of terrible teeth were fixed right here in my breast, where you saw those scars.

"Mr. Ackley must have run toward us at a prodigious rate, for it seemed to me not twenty seconds before I was deafened by a thunderous report within three feet of my ear.

"The savage teeth loosened their hold in an instant, and, springing up, I saw the jaguar lying flat on his back, with his huge paws quivering in the air.

"A whole charge of buckshot had gone through his body, just behind the shoulders, and no doubt torn his vitals to shreds.

"Mrs. Ackley soon came up, and the scene that followed was at once so joyful and so pathetic that I could have cried over it.

"The little ones ran to her arms; she could only sob in her rapturous joy, and hold them closer to her heart.

"The jaguar at which I had fired at the beginning of the affair was found dead, with seven buckshot-wounds through her skull.

"It appeared that Mr. Ackley and his wife had discovered the children's tracks and my own, and had followed the course of the hollow, as I had done.

"We got the little ones safely home, and in their earnest, pretty way they told us all about their wanderings.

"They must have come upon the hut about five hours after setting out, as it was beginning to grow dark, they said, when they 'came to a house with nobody in it,' and there they had slept all night.

"Mr. Ackley had the jaguars skinned, and I have one of those skins now. It is a beauty, and I'll show it to you any day when you call."

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